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Kansas, She Says, Is the Name of the Star

R. Garcia y Robertson

Terry Bisson

Matthew Hughes

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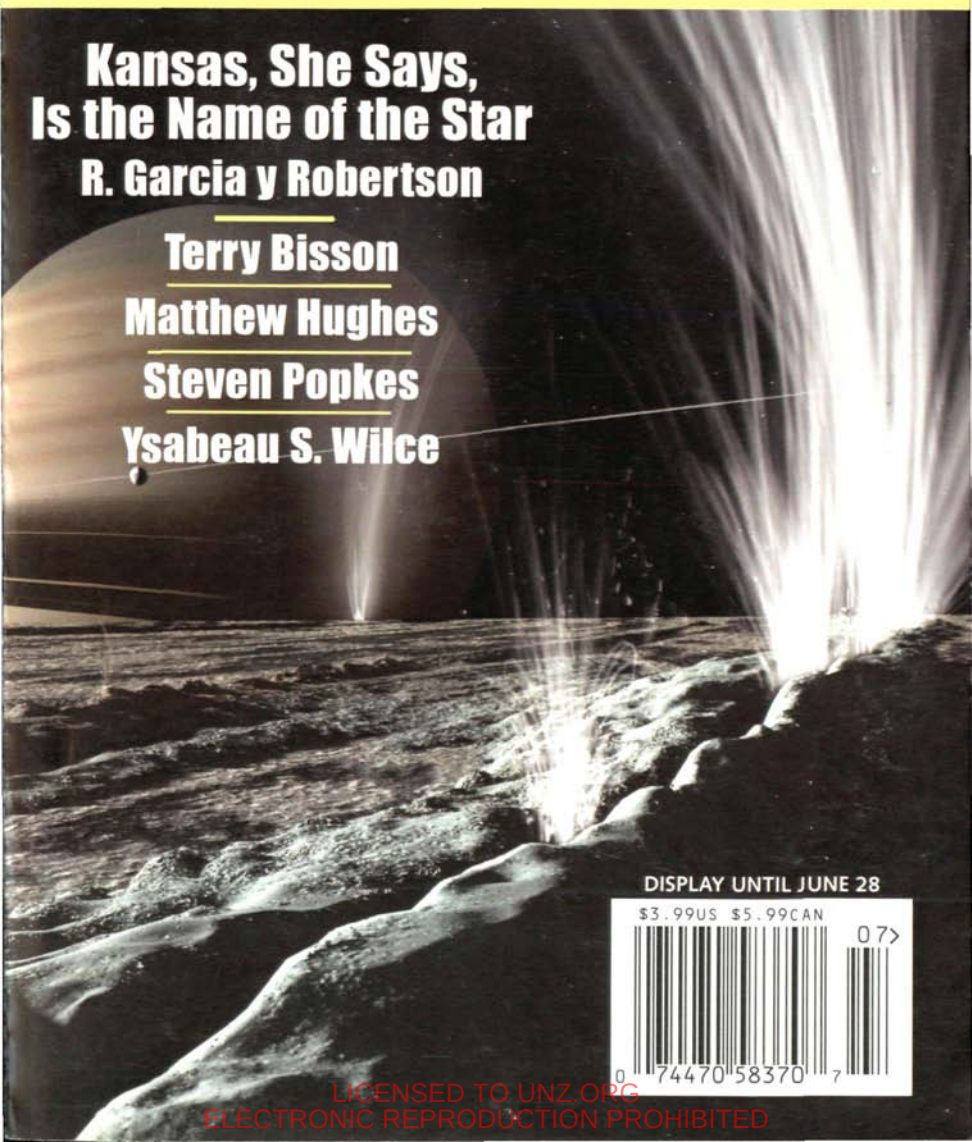

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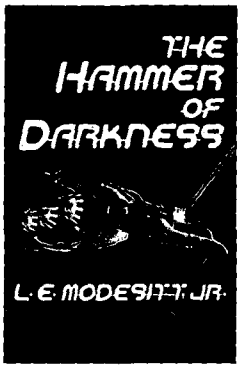

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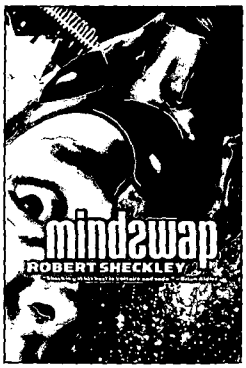

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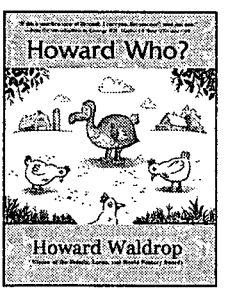

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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In recent years, most of Mr. Garcia's contributions to our pages have been fantasy stories, including the Markovy adventures. A novel entitled Firebird, *related to the story of the same name, has just been published.*

With this new tale, Mr. Garcia shifts gears to give us a science fiction story with a cinematic feel to it.

Kansas, She Says, Is the Name of the Star

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Scarecrow

AMY STARED OUT HER bedroom window as the summer sun settled into the flat cornfields, spreading gold fire over the green sea of leaves. Her red hair caught the slanting light, giving her a fiery orange halo. Alert brown eyes searched for the first evening star. Amy ached to make a wish. Tonight she was twelve for the last time. Tomorrow was her birthday, and tomorrow evening would be her wedding night.

Leaning farther out the second floor window, straining to see a star, Amy rehearsed her wish. She wanted to be eleven again, or even ten, with her wedding day years away. Amy was not in the least ready for marriage. Especially to some stranger three times her age — if she was lucky. What a ghastly thought. She would much rather shovel manure with a spoon.

But no one gave her that choice. Fat chance. Everyone acted like marrying some strange man was totally natural. No one saw it her way, not Mom, not Lilith, not Delilah, or Dot. Tuck and Nathan were boys, and

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naturally no help. And Dad had two teenage brides himself — one of them from Amy's grade. So she appealed to the evening star, since no one else would listen.

There it was, a glowing speck, low in the north, just over the shoulder of the scarecrow at the edge of the cornfield. A real star for sure, too far from the sun to be Venus. From the house, the fence line ran due north, and the star was right where Polaris would be, but lower, and brighter. She made her wish at once, "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, save me from wedded blight. I wish I may, I wish I might, be nine again tonight."

As if in answer, the star shone brighter, becoming plainly visible, instead of just a speck. Astounding, since there was no star that bright to the north. That had to mean her wish was granted, that somehow she would be set free.

Then the star fell from the sky. Trailing fire, but still blazing brightly, her star went straight down, disappearing below the northern horizon.

What in heaven (or out of it) was that? Nothing that she ever saw before, that's for sure. Maybe she was fated to wed.

Not having the heart to search out a second star, Amy lay back down on the bed, though it was not yet dark. Tonight was her last night alone, in her own bed, in her own home, so she might as well make the best of it.

Breakfast came all too soon, and Amy was last to the table, where she was greeted by a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday," followed by a party, complete with cake and presents. Clothes from her mom and step-moms. Dot gave her a flower, and the boys had whittled her a whistle. Dad gave her his best leather traveling bag.

Amy did her best to be sociable, sitting down and thanking everyone for the presents, though she had small appetite for cake. Mother suggested that she try to enjoy herself, saying, "We won't be together again for a long while."

No lie. Amy replied, "I do not want to be thirteen."

That was a mere statement of fact, but Mom took it as childish rebellion. "We cannot help growing up. I am much older than I would like to be."

Only blonde Lilith tried to comfort her, smiling hopefully and

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pressing her bare foot against Amy's under the table. Being youngest wife, Lilith could do little else. They were friends, and in the same grade because Lilith had been held back, twice. Nothing says family like doing your step-mom's homework.

"You are at the age of consent," Mother reminded her, as if Amy could have possibly forgotten.

Dad added practically, "If we do not take you to Concordia to register, then the Bushwhackers will."

At least with Bushwhackers she had half a chance. Being older than all three of his wives combined, Dad took the long view, letting his women handle family issues. Yet he was always attentive and affectionate, being very fond of young girls, treating Amy a lot like a favorite grandchild. And he never laid a hand on her, preferring to correct with a belt.

"What is the use of consenting, if I do not want to?" Amy asked stubbornly.

"Consent just means it is up to you," her father intoned.

Mother added, "No one is making you marry."

Delilah smiled wickedly across the table. "There is always the maiden's academy."

"Right." From all that Amy had heard, the Concordia Academy for Reluctant Virgins made marriage seem a blessing. Delilah had married Dad at thirteen, and thought this was fussing over nothing. With a young daughter, and Lilith as a live-in babysitter, Delilah enjoyed herself immensely. Last night had been her night, and Delilah once told her stepdaughter, "He looks old, but your Dad's real active with the light out."

Just what every daughter wants to hear. Amy sat in glum silence, wishing a tornado would tear the whole house away.

"Maybe no one will want you," Tuck suggested. "I wouldn't."

Nathan agreed, "Me neither."

Small chance of that. Some girls were sent home, but not many. Lilith failed both fifth and sixth grade, but had no trouble getting married. Amy knew just by looking in the water pail that someone would want her, young as she was, and without her having to show a lick of sense, or even say a thing. When her party was over, Amy stalked upstairs to pack.

Delilah's daughter Dot toddled after her, asking, "Are yew goin', Aunti Em?"

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Dot could not say Amy, always calling her Aunti Em. It was too hard to explain to a toddler that she was not her aunt, but her half-sister. All she said was, "Yeah, Aunti Em is going."

"Me miss yew." Dot plainly meant it.

"Me too." She would miss not just Dot and the family, but her whole life, which would very soon cease to be her own.

Glancing out the window, she saw the road stretching north past the cornfield, past the scarecrow, disappearing into the morning haze. She heard the boys bringing out the horses to hitch to the wagon. Concordia was a long ride off, and they would need to start before noon.

Dot clung to her, saying, "No want you go!"

Squatting down, Amy got on a level with her half-sister, saying, "I will miss you very much."

For one wild moment, she thought she should take Dot with her, though she had no idea where she was going. But wherever it was it had to be better than here. And Dot was her true sister, the only other female born into the family. But Dot was also Delilah's daughter, for better or for worse.

"Yew will come back?" Dot demanded.

"Yeah," she gave her little sister a hug. "I will come back for you." Dot had a good ten years before she turned thirteen; maybe then Amy could come for her. "Now go find your Mom."

"Bye-bye, Aunti Em." Dot scooted off, thinking it was a game.

Amy wished it was. Stuffing everything she could take into a knapsack, she left her Dad's leather bag sitting open on the carpet. Then she swung out the window and shinned down the drainpipe, something she had done hundreds of times in the dark, just never in daylight, and carrying a pack. Except for chickens scratching about, the yard below was empty.

She ducked into the smokehouse and came out with some hard sausage. As she filled her waterbag from the well, Amy took a last look at the house, which was tall and square, with big windows that made it look like a giant dollhouse. Two trees gave the only bit of shade for more than a mile around. When her bag was full, she cut across the chicken yard and went over the back fence, disappearing into the corn.

Moving easily through the tangled green maze, she followed the big hand-plowed furrows to the corner where the road heading east to Aurora

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crossed the one that ran by their farm. This was where the scarecrow stood, wearing Nathan's shirt and jacket, cast-off overalls, and a ragged straw hat. Pulling the shirt and overalls over her underwear, she tucked the jacket into her pack strap and put her hair up under the hat. From a decent distance she might pass for a boy, if it was a man looking for her.

There was no room for her dress, so she buried her face in the fabric, smelling her mother's scent, from when they hugged around the cake. Then she stuffed it deep between the cornrows and headed on her way.

Tin Man

BROUGHT UP in a very deserted part of Cloud County, with Aurora far to the east and nothing to the west but the county line, Amy had no notion where she should head. Or what the wider world was like. Geography was not one of the three Rs — Reading, Rhythm, and Regulations. But she was determined to follow her star, heading due north, even if it took her into Republic County. Her biggest fear was Bushwhackers, and it was far too soon for them to be searching for her.

When her family did not show in Concordia, people would want to know why — but it would be a day at least before she was posted as a runaway bride. Aiming to make the most of her reprieve, Amy walked briskly along in her scarecrow clothes, not looking back.

Wagons went by. Then cheerful families on buggies, but Amy turned down every offer of a ride. In theory she had done no wrong, and had until dusk to register as a bride, but she did not want helpful strangers whisking her into Concordia.

After ten or so miles, she had to make her first detour, swinging west through the fields to avoid Jamestown, and the road to Concordia.

Now she was clearly on the run, with nothing ahead of her but the county line. Grasshoppers bounded about in the heat, soaring away down the road, waiting for her to catch up, then flying off again.

Dust appeared ahead, a small thin cloud that might have been a whirlwind, since it was certainly tornado weather. She watched the dust devil come closer, not feeling especially wary, until the cloud topped a rise. There was a Wheeler beneath it, headed straight at her.

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Damn! Only the second Wheeler she had ever seen. What a time for him to show up. Wheelers lived far to the west, beyond Norton and Oberlin. They were scary fast, and would turn her in as easy as Bushwhackers. Both were always looking out for girls on the run. Leaving the road would just attract attention. Amy pulled her hat down over face and kept on walking, sure he could not be looking for her.

Rapidly, the Wheeler got closer, becoming a man in a scarlet suit and black boots, seated atop a silver frame, with two spoked wheels that seemed to turn on their own, whirling along without a horse or peddles, trailing a tall cloud of dust. Grabbing her straw hat to help cover her face, Amy waved vigorously as the Wheeler sped past. That was what a boy would do. He was wearing goggles and a red cap, and guiding the front wheel with silver handlebars, so long and curved that he could lean back in his seat, steering in complete comfort.

Fast as he had come, the Wheeler was gone, not even giving her a glance. Dust settled, and Amy quickened her pace, determined not to be surprised so easily next time.

Now she kept looking over her shoulder, and half a mile farther along she spotted another cloud of dust — this time to the south. Another Wheeler. Two in one day. Or the same one coming back to have a closer look.

Amy ducked into the corn, threading through the green rows until she could not be seen from the road. Sure enough, this time the Wheeler seemed to slow, and maybe even stop, as though searching for her. But there was nothing to see, and the dust cloud went whirling off to the north.

She no longer felt safe on the road, a feeling soon reinforced by yet another passing Wheeler, this one headed south. Or maybe it was the same one, still looking for her.

Heading north through the corn rows, she slid between the stalks, letting the furrows guide her feet. Dodging the Wheelers was no fun, but it gave her more purpose, just like her star gave her direction. Which was good, since she knew what she was running from, but not where she was going.

Without warning, Amy came upon a dish-like depression twenty yards across. There the corn was crushed down, with the flattened stalks

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radiating outward from the center, where a smaller deeper ring was gouged into the ground. For the first time since leaving the road, Amy saw open sky. It scared her.

Something with a big saucer-shaped bottom had fallen out of that sky, crushed the corn, then gone on its way. A distant dust plume signaled another Wheeler on the road.

Skirting the depression, Amy sought safety in the narrow green tunnels, sliding between the tall stalks. Crows cawed at the walking scarecrow, but no one else noticed.

She soon came on another saucer-like depression, which she also avoided. But beyond that her way was suddenly blocked by a long break in the corn, stretching straight across her path. What to do now? All the flattened corn was facing one way, as though something had whipped through the rows, inches above the ground. Nothing like this ever happened back on the farm.

Amy tried to go around the break. She ran right into a great silver wing, slanting into the ground. This stiff silver wing had cut through the corn like a scythe, slicing out a wide clearing. Attached to it was the crushed and burnt fuselage of a sailplane.

Forgetting her fear, Amy crept closer. She had seen sailplanes gliding overhead, but never this close up, near enough to touch, if she dared.

Wedged inside the crumpled cockpit was the biggest monkey Amy had ever seen. Bigger than her, and dead, with his dried blood spattered over the the smashed controls.

Sheesh! Awfully gory, even to Amy, who gutted pigs and beheaded chickens at home — pigs she considered her friends, and hens she had raised from chicks. Amy backed away slowly, until she was standing smack up against the corn. She hoped that up past Concordia things might be different — but not this different. First Wheelers, then this mashed flying monkey. What next?

As if in answer, she heard someone crashing toward her. Horses were coming, many horses, thrashing through the corn. The only folks who casually rode over a farmer's standing corn, with no care or warning, were Bushwhackers.

Amy spun about and vanished into the corn, having little faith in her scarecrow disguise. If Bushwhackers did not like how she looked, they

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would sling her over a saddle and take her into Concordia just to be sure. Hooting and hollering the whole way.

Who needed that? Not her. She followed the furrows away from the wreck, working her way downwind, in case they had dogs. When she found a safe spot beneath the corn, she squatted and listened for pursuit, unsure what to do next. Following her star had gotten her in more trouble than Amy could have ever imagined. Bushwhackers should not even be looking for her, but here they were, so close she could smell the dust and horse sweat.

Without warning, a soft voice behind her hissed, "Hey, kid."

Amy almost leaped out of her scarecrow pants, spinning swiftly about. Behind her, crouched in the corn, was a dark-haired, smiling girl in a blue-checked gingham dress, wearing pigtails and bright ruby-red slippers. She waved to Amy, saying, "Come here."

Surprised at being called kid by someone smaller than she was, Amy crawled back through the corn to where the girl in the gingham dress was hiding. Looking Amy over keenly, the little girl asked, "Who are you?"

"Tip." The first male name that came to mind; it belonged to one of their dogs.

"If you say so." The little girl produced a small clear capsule from her dress pocket, holding it up to Amy's mouth. "Here, spit in this."

Amy looked at her like she was crazy.

"Go on, spit," the girl insisted. "It won't hurt."

She spit, then asked, "What is that for?"

"DNA sample." The girl carefully closed the capsule, held it up to the light, then tucked it into her checked dress, adding, "We had better get going."

"Going where?"

"Away from here." The girl nodded toward the crash site. "That sailplane was a two-seater, and there is only one body. Even Bushwhackers can count that far."

Amy had not thought of that. She asked, "What was that in the wreck?"

"SuperChimp named Ham. He was my pilot."

"Your pilot?"

"Damned good one too, named for the first ape in space."

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Getting up, the girl smoothed out her dress, saying, "Come on, before Bushwhackers come looking."

They set out, sliding in silence for most of an hour through green tunnels of corn. With no more obstructions or weird depressions, the cornfields went on until they came on a creek, lined with cottonwoods. Here they stopped to drink and rest their hot feet in cool rippling water. Amy asked, "What's your name?"

"Dorothy," the girl in gingham replied.

"Means Beloved of God," Amy observed piously.

Dorothy nodded. "One of the reasons I picked it."

"You don't come from around here, do you?" Amy guessed. Girls she knew did not pick their names.

"Heavens, no." Dorothy smiled at the notion. "I fell out of the sky. Last night, actually. Haven't been here a day."

Amy believed it. Dorothy did not act or talk like a little girl, but Amy did not press the subject, since she was pretending to be a boy. "Fell from where?"

"Kansas system."

Amy had never heard of it. "What county is that?"

Dorothy smiled at her naiveté. "Kansas is a G-type star, not far from here. We are actually distant binaries."

Star travel sounded like something from fairy tales. "What are you doing here?"

"Right now, trying to get home," Dorothy explained airily. "Got anything to eat?"

Amy opened her pack and produced a piece of cake. Dorothy's sly smile broke into a grin. "Birthday cake?"

"There's also some hard sausage."

"Cake's fine." Dorothy broke off a bit of frosted corner and stuffed it in her mouth. "So, how old are you today?"

"Thirteen," Amy admitted.

"Sorry to hear that."

"Me too." Amy forgot she was supposed to be a boy.

"So did you run off?"

Amy nodded guiltily. "Do you blame me?"

"Heavens no!" Dorothy hurried to console her. "Barefoot and pregnant is no way to start junior high."

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Dorothy broke off more cake. "Is 'Tip' a product of whimsical parents, or part of your disguise?"

"My name is Amy. And I am on the run, but I don't know to where. Last night, I tried to wish upon the first star, and it fell from the sky, trailing fire. I've been following it ever since."

"That was me," Dorothy declared, happily splashing her feet in the stream. "Couple of saucers got us."

"Saucers?"

"UFOs," Dorothy explained. "Those moving lights you see at night."

"Dad says that's swamp gas."

Dorothy rolled her eyes. "See any swamps on your way here?"

She hadn't. Just lots of corn, and summer wheat.

"Saucers are scary smart," Dorothy warned, "and can see for miles. UFOs are why I was lying low, until those Bushwhackers arrived."

Amy told Dorothy about her own adventures since leaving home, dodging Wheelers, then Bushwhackers. Dorothy was impressed. "You saw my ship shot down, and came straight here? That shows good sense, and keen navigation."

Amy was not so sure. "I thought it was a star."

"Still, you got here, and that's what counts." They headed off downstream, walking in the water to confuse their scent, in case the Bushwhackers brought dogs — which they did when they had difficult girls to track. Bushwhackers kept in practice by hunting coons in the dark.

This little stream led them to the Republican River, which ran down from Republican County and the Pawnee Nation. They camped on the south bank of the Republican, making a fire, and staring up at the stars, while chewing hard sausage. Amy smirked, saying, "This was going to be my wedding night."

"Disappointed?" Dorothy asked.

"Not at all." Thirteen and unmarried. Only that morning Amy thought it was impossible, now it felt wonderful. With nowhere to go, this warm campfire seemed the perfect place to be. "Where is Kansas, the star you came from?"

"You can barely see it from Earth." Dorothy searched the sky, then pointed, saying, "That dim one, there."

"I see it." Amy knew the night sky by heart.

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"Kansas is the name of the star. It has two terraformed planets, Wichita and Topeka — but I'm not from either of them. I was born aboard ship."

"So, how old are you?" Amy asked suspiciously.

"In Earth years?" Dorothy smirked. "Way older than you."

Small surprise, Dorothy acted much older than anyone Amy knew, except maybe Dad. "But you look like a kid."

"I'm a Munchkin." Dorothy acted nonchalant. "We are bio-engineered not to mature, or even go through puberty."

"Why?" That was the strangest thing Amy had heard since leaving home, weirder than flying monkeys.

"Because some folks thought it would be fun." Dorothy sounded breezy, but still a bit bitter. "Rich pedophiles, high-end pimps, and greedy genetechs. I was rescued from a slaver harem when I was four."

"Slavers?" One of those words Amy had heard whispered by adults, when she was not supposed to be listening.

"Like Bushwhackers, only worse."

"So how old are you?"

Sitting in the flickering firelight, Dorothy looked nine or ten, at most. "Thirty-two standard years, not counting relativity effects. I have lived half my life at light speed."

"So you have no family?"

"Conceived in a lab, and born in an incubator. My earliest memories are of living in a creche, with a bunch of other babies for sale, aboard the slaver Hydra. But I have a perfectly fine foster family on Topeka. They're the folks who raised me."

And Amy thought her life was weird.

Next morning they were up with the birds, breakfasting on the last of her birthday cake. As Amy fed crumbs to the sparrows, Dorothy laid out the day. "We can follow the Republican up into the next county. Once we get past Kackley there are no towns to worry about until we get to the pickup point just beyond Jewel City. Ham was supposed to drop me off, then fly me to safety — but in case something bad happened, there are other arrangements."

Something bad had happened, especially to Ham, spattered all over his cockpit. Now it was just assumed that they were both going to this "pickup." If Amy had another choice she might well have taken it.

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Dorothy sensed her fear. "Just remember, west of Jewel City, tomorrow night, near to dawn. Get there, and we are both okay. What you don't know, Bushwhackers can't beat out of you."

A happy thought. Like parents and teachers, Bushwhackers had the authority to thrash the truth out of flagrant liars, or errant runaways. Amy was both.

Heading upriver, they crossed over into Republic County, named for the Pawnee Republic, lying farther upstream. Amy wished the Pawnee would take her in, but late summer was when they had their virgin corn-sacrifice to the Morning Star. Not the best time to go knocking on Pawnee long lodges.

Eventually they came to a bridge, and a road crossing it, paved with yellow bricks. Each brick was stamped GOLDEN BRICK COMPANY, JEWEL CITY.

They set out down the yellow brick road, talking and laughing. Only to find Kackley full of Wheelers, some headed south into Cloud County, most just speeding around town, kicking up dust. Not a pretty sight.

This meant another miles-long detour through the fields, consuming most of the morning. Twice, Dorothy begged food and DNA samples from farm families. When they got back to the yellow brick road, it was afternoon already, with many long miles to go. At the county line, the road jogged to the south, for a while forming the border; then it turned decisively into Jewel County.

Almost at once, their luck changed. They came upon a repair robot mortaring up a pothole — a tin-plated mechanical man, bearing the company motto on his chest, "We Lay Good and Gold Brick."

On his shiny back it said, "Golden Brick Company, Jewel City and County."

"Just what we need," Dorothy decided, producing an electronic bug, shaped like a spider. Amy watched in amazement as the bug scurried across the gold bricks, then raced up the robot's tin-plated leg and body. As soon as the spider clamped itself to the robot's head, the brick layer froze in midmotion.

"These repair robots don't have much of a brain," Dorothy expained. "Hop aboard. He will do whatever we want."

Dorothy had the robot dump his bricks and pick them up instead. "So

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long as that bug stays attached, the robot will obey both you and me. Try it out."

Amy told the mechanical man to head west, and he did, carrying them easily over the yellow bricks. This was the way to travel, with no effort, sitting on the robot's shoulder, able to see all around, with her feet resting in his metal hand. Though the robot could not outrun the Wheelers, they could easily spot them coming. Amy asked, "What if Wheelers are waiting for us at Jewel City?"

"Wheelers are at their worst at night." Dorothy had no fear in the dark, being able to gather firewood and count stars long after Amy gave up.

They ran into trouble well before dusk. As the sun dipped into the southwest, a silver disk separated from the corona and started sweeping the sky between them and Jewel City.

Dorothy ordered the robot off the road, headed north fast and hard, saying, "That UFO is hunting us. It came right out of the sun to sweep the road. We dare not approach until dark."

Not content just to hide, Dorothy told the mechanical man to keep going north toward Webber, up by the Pawnee Nation. "Those disks see a long way, and tell the Bushwhackers where to search."

Amy believed it. Bushwhackers had been on to her faster than she ever thought possible. As the sun set behind them, they kept on going, crossing the White Rock fork of the Republican, and skirting Webber in the dark. Amy worried aloud, saying, "There are nothing but Pawnee up here."

"That's why we are going through in the dark," Dorothy explained. "It's virgin sacrifice season."

"Don't have to tell me," Amy whispered back. The Pawnee habit of sacrificing stray virgins to the Morning Star was the only drawback of an otherwise friendly and hospitable people. "What's beyond the Pawnee?"

This was a question Amy had never thought to ask before. Pawnee to the north, Cheyenne to the west, and Ottawas to the south, those were the limits of her world — heard of, but hardly ever seen. All Dorothy said was, "You'll see."

And Amy did. Without much warning, the open prairie and creekbed farmlands favored by Pawnee and Ottawas turned into sandy desert, followed by fenced wheatfields shining in the moonlight, backed by stands of corn.

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She had thought that beyond the Pawnee there could only be more Indians. Instead it looked like home. "Where are we?"

"This is Mitchell County. We are still headed north, aiming to cross the Solomon, west of Beloit."

Amy could tell they were headed north, aimed smack at the Little Dipper, but the rest made no sense. Mitchell County was south of Jewel City. Beloit was just about even with her home, only one county over. "How could we get here by heading north?"

Dorothy sighed. "Here's where it gets hard. You're not living on Earth. Not even close."

"Not Earth?" Where else could she be?

"Brace yourself," Dorothy advised. "Your world is not even a planet, it's a habitat, a spinning torus about a hundred miles across, orbiting in a dead system. Everything looks flat to you because of gravity control and 3V effects. North just means moving around the inner surface of the torus counter-clockwise."

Amy stared at Dorothy in disbelief, but the little girl in gingham just said, "Get used to it. Every world is finite. Yours is just smaller than most, and turned in on itself, like an overgrown doughnut. North is counter-clockwise, south is clockwise, east is spinward, and west is anti-spinward. If you go straight in any direction, you will come back to where you started."

Apparently. Amy still could not believe it.

"Same is true in the big universe outside," Dorothy told her, "discounting relativity effects. Ottawas and Pawnee have known this for a long time, but settled folk tend to hide it from the kids."

Proof of this outrageous claim came when they crossed the Solomon west of Beloit, and Amy recognized the big covered bridge, having been there before. Soon they were back in Jewel County, and she could see Jewel City sparkling in the distance. Just to the north of them was the yellow brick road that they had left many miles to the south.

Dorothy weighed their chances of making the rendezvous. "This is the area they searched yesterday afternoon. They found nothing, so it should be safe to enter, especially from the south. I've programmed the pickup point into this robot, so whatever happens, try to stay with him."

With nowhere else to go, Amy nodded vigorously. Supported by the

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swift, strong metal man, she felt invulnerable. From what Dorothy said, there was a huge wide cosmos beyond the narrow limits of her world. This was her best chance of getting there. If she did not go with Dorothy, she might as well give herself to the Bushwhackers.

Before they even got to the yellow brick road, Amy saw lights blinking to the east, between them and Jewel City. Dorothy told the metal man to put them down, saying, "We should go on foot from here. It'll attract less attention."

"What about him?" Amy had grown fond of the robot.

Dorothy smiled at her concern, saying, "I'm leaving the bug on him, just in case. Hopefully we're home free."

"Home" and "free" were two words Amy never put together, but Dorothy was full of such odd sayings.

As they approached the road, Dorothy whispered for silence. "Pickup is now, two hundred meters north of the road. If you lose me, just keep heading for the Little Dipper."

Amy nodded. Follow the Drinking Gourd. Holding onto Dorothy's hand, she crept up to the road. Dawn glowed faintly in the east, beyond the lights of Jewel City, but by now the moon had set, leaving only starlight to the north. Amy did not see the road until she stumbled hard on an invisible brick.

"Shit!" Dorothy hissed. "We've been seen."

By whom? Amy peered about, nursing her hurt toe, seeing nothing. Dorothy shoved her back off the road, saying, "Run."

Run where? Suddenly, stabbing bright lights flashed in her eyes, blinding her even more. Unable to see, she fell to her knees, holding her hat. Dorothy stepped between her and the glaring lights, a small dark blur.

Wheels whined in the dark, and the lights leaped forward, flashing down the road toward Dorothy. Amy wanted to scream, but did not dare, as the lights sped past and Dorothy disappeared.

Blinded again, Amy stared into darkness, still on her knees, listening for Wheelers. Nothing. Amy could not hear any Wheelers, or see the lights of Jewel City. She wanted to call out to Dorothy, but it would do no good.

Suddenly, strong hands seized her, lifting her up. She struggled against the merciless grip, expecting to hear a triumphant Bushwhacker

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yell. But the hands holding her were cold tin-plated metal. It was the robot, and he began to run with her, across the yellow brick road and on into the night.

Cowardly Lion

DAWN FOUND AMY sitting in a cold wheatfield, miserable and alone, with the silent robot at her side. Tall fluffy clouds dotted the bright 3V sky. Pickup, whatever that meant, had not happened. Instead she had lost Dorothy, the best friend she ever had. Practically her only friend. Sure Dorothy was weird, but no weirder than tutoring her seventh-grade stepmom, or having Dot call her "Aunti Em." Given her family, anyone Amy got to know was sure to be strange.

Despite Dorothy's genetic deformity, the Munchkin was the bravest, smartest person Amy had ever known. The only one to say, "Look girl, this is totally nuts. We're getting you out of here."

Now she was going nowhere. Whoever was coming for Dorothy, did not come for her — leaving Amy with no notion what to do next. Her big, shining, tin-plated robot was strong, fast, tireless, and obedient, but unable to offer suggestions. Worming advice out of the metal man got answers like:

PLEASE REPHRASE QUESTION

Or maybe:

SPECIFY POINT-SECOND

And repeatedly:

VOID DATA FIELD

If he only had a brain. Taking a drink from her waterbag, Amy noted it would need to be filled. Not so easy this far from the Solomon, where creeks were few and dry.

Deciding to pee, she got up and walked around behind the metal man, going a good ways into the wheat. Sure, he was just a machine that saw and

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talked, but it made her feel better. Pulling down her scarecrow pants, she squatted in the wheat, wondering what to do next.

Nothing came to mind. As Amy finished, and pulled up her pants, she was blindsided by a tawny blur that shot out of the wheat stalks, knocking her off her feet.

Clawed hands seized her, one covering her mouth, the other pressing her into the wheat. Something heavy and hairy had landed on top of her, holding her down and hissing in her ear, "Stop thrashing and squealing. You're going to give us away."

Us? What did this beast mean? Though it had hands and fingers, the thing holding her most resembled a man-sized panther, with tan fur and a slight lisp. He whispered, "Promise not to scream, and I will take my hand away."

She nodded vigorously, and his hand relaxed. Amy breathed out, then turned to look at her attacker. Seeing a tawny, yellow-eyed cat face, with white saber-like canines inches from her throat, Amy shrieked.

His hand cut off her cry. "You promised," he hissed. "Screaming will just bring Bushwhackers."

Neither of them wanted that. Amy nodded again, and he relaxed his grip. She asked, "Who are you?"

"Call me Leo," the big cat suggested, "a lot of humans do."

"What are you?"

"Never seen a SuperCat?" Leo sounded sorry for her. "We're a genetic improvement on humanity, faster, stronger, smarter, and fiercer, created centuries back from human and big cat DNA, to tackle superhuman tasks."

So far, all Leo had tackled was her, but he was rigged for trouble, wearing battle-armor, and a string of gas grenades that dug into Amy's side. She was also getting her first close-up look at the butt of a military-style stinger, tucked into the SuperCat's furry armpit. Leo's sly saber-toothed smile widened. "My current task is simple. Have you seen a small dark-haired female in a blue dress? I fear she is in distress."

"Maybe." Leo was no Bushwhacker. Or Wheeler. This heavily armed, gene-spliced catman fairly screamed "off-world." Animals in Cloud County usually knew their place. Only parrots talked, and even the worst chicken-thief coyotes stole about unarmed.

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"My orders are to rescue her," Leo explained. "She is Peace Corps, assigned to this world."

Peace Corps. Another word adults only whispered. Besides runaway girls, Bushwhackers were on the lookout for Peace Corps spies, who were the worst sort of Jayhawkers, fiends that came in the night to steal naughty girls like Amy. What they did with them, heaven only knew. Dorothy hardly fit the image.

Smiling slyly, the SuperCat cocked an eye at her. "Tell me you never heard of the Peace Corps?"

"I have heard of them." She just did not know who they were.

"Good." Leo got up, setting Amy back on her feet. "'Cause they are the only folks within a billion light-years who give a hoot about your naked-monkey ass. So you need to help me."

Amy finished pulling up her pants, telling her attacker, "You didn't have to jump me while I was peeing."

Leo laughed, standing up on his hind legs. "Second best time to hit an awake human. I didn't want to tackle your robot too. That was the only time you parted from him."

"Right." Good thing she had already peed. It was nice to know that he feared the robot, which was programmed to defend humans from animal attack.

Her captor patted chaff off her pants, asking, "So have you seen Dorothy?"

"Wheelers took her." Amy pointed back toward the yellow brick road. "Heading west."

"Probably taking her back to Wheeler," Leo decided.

"What will happen to her?" By now she was horribly worried for Dorothy. Wheeler sounded worse than the Concordia Academy for Reluctant Virgins.

Furry shoulders shrugged. "Do I look like a Wheeler?"

Not a lot. "So what will you do?"

"Report that she did not make pickup."

Leo was beginning to sound like the robot. Amy scooped up her hat, saying, "I'm going to find her."

"In Wheeler?" Leo laughed aloud.

Wherever. Two days away from home, with nothing but her scarecrow

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clothes, and a next to useless robot, Amy knew what to do. Dorothy needed to be saved. Her whole life turned on that wish-upon-a-star. Going back now would be as good as suicide.

"This is nonsense," Leo declared, as she stalked over to the tin man, telling him to pick her up. The robot hoisted her onto its shoulder.

"What will you do for me?" Amy asked. "If I give up on Dorothy, what do I get?"

Leo shrugged again. "Nothing."

Exactly. Leo meant to abandon her, as soon as she ceased to be useful. Dorothy deserved better than that. Amy told the robot to take her to the yellow brick road, and head west.

Rolling his eyes, Leo trotted after her, saying, "You're going the wrong way."

Amy shot back. "Why do you care?"

"I don't," Leo assured her. "But I cannot allow you to get caught. You know too much."

Of course. So long as it was just Dorothy, he didn't care. But she had seen Leo, and the SuperCat could not afford to let Bushwhackers beat the truth out of her — then come looking for him. Hardly caring about humans, Leo was very careful with his own furry skin.

Leo told her, "Wheelers have to use the yellow brick road, going west to Wheeler. That's the long way around the torus. We can go the short way, through the Kickapoos to Cheyenne country, getting to Wheeler before they arrive."

Head the wrong way and get there first. Why was she the only one who thought that sounded wrong? "And you're coming with me?"

"Reluctantly," Leo admitted. He could not coerce her so long as she sat atop her tin-plated protector.

So they turned about, heading for Kickapoo Country, bypassing Jewel City, Kackley, Norway, and Agenda. When the yellow brick road ended, Leo led her through the badlands in broad daylight, without so much as seeing a Kickapoo. Leo was not lying about his SuperCat abilities. Only the tireless tin man let Amy keep up.

In a few hours they had come back around, and were in Cheyenne County, crossing the south fork of the Republican, which should have been miles behind them. On the far bank, Amy saw the yellow brick road

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rising out of the stream. She had found the west end of the road by heading east, making her world very much smaller than she ever imagined.

Leo led her past Wheeler, to a lonely stretch of the yellow brick road west of Bird City, so close Amy glimpsed the half-mile tall aviary tower. She would have liked to get a closer look, but feared being spotted by Birdmen, who were little better than flying Bushwhackers. By now she was a posted runaway bride, with a generous reward for her capture, payable in Concordia.

At a shady spot out of sight of the tower, she and Leo settled down to watch the road. Curious about the wider universe, Amy asked the SuperCat, "Where do you come from?"

"From a world far, far away," Leo replied airily.

"Why?"

"Excellent question, especially when I am about to take on a pack of Wheelers, aided by a scarecrow in drag." Leo clearly did not like their chances, and resented her putting him here. "This is what I do. Every so often, the Peace Corps must be backed by the sure and precise use of force. Something humans are pretty horrible at."

Hard to argue there. All the force in Cloud County, from Bushwhackers to just plain folks, were aimed at making her life hell — for no good reason that Amy could see.

This deep in Cheyenne County, there was scant traffic on the yellow brick road, so when a dust cloud appeared, Amy knew it would be Wheelers. Leo looked intently down the road, finally saying, "She's with them."

"How can you tell?" All Amy could see was dots beneath the dust cloud.

Leo tapped the corner of his eye. "2000x1 night lenses. I can see her yellow bows."

No wonder Dorothy could find her way in the dark. Amy held her breath, watching the dust cloud get bigger. Looking away for a moment, she saw that Leo had vanished, along with the robot. Just like the cowardly lion to leave her all alone.

By now the Wheelers were near enough for her to see Dorothy, strapped in a side-car. As the Wheelers drew abreast of her, gas grenades went off along the yellow brick road. Sleep gas billowed up on both sides

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of the Wheelers, who lost control, skidding and crashing into one another. Dorothy's side-car kept her motorcycle stable, and it came roaring out of the white gas cloud, with Dorothy asleep, and the tin man at the controls.

Very neatly done. Leo rose out of the long grass, never having gotten near the wrecked Wheelers. The robot brought the cycle to a stop in front of Amy, with Dorothy still slumped in the side-car. Leo sauntered over and administered an antidote.

Dorothy's eyes flipped open, and the girl in blue gingham stared up at the 3V sky, asking, "Where am I?"

Amy knelt down to take her hand. "Just west of Bird City, on the way to Wheeler."

That shocked Dorothy. "What the hell am I doing here?"

"It will take too long to tell," Leo objected. "We've missed pickup, and must make for Mount Sunflower."

Dorothy grimmaced. "That bad?"

"Worse," the SuperCat assured her, helping Dorothy mount the robot. Amy climbed up onto the other shoulder, and they headed for Mount Sunflower, leaving unconscious Wheelers littering the yellow brick road.

South of Wheeler, rolling plains rose toward mile-high Mount Sunflower. They crossed the Little Beaver and the North Fork of the Smoky Hill, seeing nothing but Cheyenne lodges and clumps of buffalo. Ominous lightning strikes to the north were followed by distant rolling thunder, on an otherwise sunny day. Clearly tornado weather.

Beyond the North Smoky, Dorothy spotted something behind them. "UFO to the north."

Leo glumly agreed, but it was twenty minutes before Amy made out a blue-white spark near the northern horizon, backed by tall spiked clouds and a darkening sky. Feeling the breeze stirring, and pressure dropping, Amy warned, "There's a tornado coming."

"Do tell?" Leo had come to the same conclusion.

Amy asked Dorothy, "What happens when we get to Mount Sunflower?"

Her Munchkin friend smiled, saying, "The summit has an emergency exit to the habitat — where no one would likely stumble on it." Despite

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all Amy had seen, it was amazing to think that her world was so tiny that it had hidden exits into the real cosmos.

As the land rose toward Mount Sunflower, rain fell, just a sprinkling at first, followed by hail — stinging pea-sized balls of ice — that grew to frosty marbles, battering at Amy's scarecrow hat. Wind kicked up, whipping the ice about, and Amy could see the clouds over Mount Sunflower circling in a familiar pattern. Holding hard to her hat, she fought the mounting suction.

Hail turned to horizontal rain, lashing at their faces, then suddenly ceasing as they entered the eye of the cyclone. Amy clung to the robot's shoulder, while Dorothy ordered the tin-plated man to run faster. Looking straight up, Amy could see a funnel cloud forming directly overhead, a great gray whirlpool, spinning faster and rising higher.

At the summit of Mount Sunflower, debris rained down, twigs, branches, clods of mud, roof nails and barn shingles. Howling winds tore at Amy's hold on the robot. Her straw hat flew off. A few more seconds, and the swirling funnel of grit and pebbles would pull her fingers free, and whirl her away as well. Amy's whole world had turned on her — Wheelers, UFOs, Birdmen, Bushwhackers, and now a twister.

Leo knelt and grabbed a patch of ground, yanking it up, revealing a pressure lock. As he did, the tornado touched down, pulling Leo off his feet, lifting the ground up with him. Holding grimly to the latch, Leo bellowed for help, telling the robot, "Take us down, damn you."

Only the robot had the weight to resist the twister. Diving into the hole, with Amy and Dorothy clinging to his back, the tin man grabbed Leo as he fell past, hauling the SuperCat in with them. "Close the lock," roared Leo, clawing at the lock ladder as tornado winds tried to suck them back out. "Shut it, now!"

Fighting tremendous suction, the lock mechanism struggled to obey. Then the robot threw his full weight on the hatch, dragging it closed. Howling ceased, and the wind stopped.

Silence filled the small metal airlock. Amy saw they were all there, looking wet and bedraggled — Dorothy, Leo, and the tin man, covered with dirt and twigs, but safe for the moment. Her scarecrow clothes were totally soaked.

Pressure suits hung from the lock walls, and there was another hatch

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in the chamber floor. Dorothy showed her how to choose the right-sized suit, and how to seal it tight. Leo had more trouble suiting up than she did.

Then Amy hugged the tin man, saying good-bye to the robot, who responded with a pleasant:

NULL PROGRAM

"I'll remember you too," Amy promised the metal man. Dorothy retrieved her bug, then Leo emptied the lock and threw back the bottom hatch.

Amy stared down the incredibly deep shaft beneath, startled to see stars at the far end. Literally the end of the world. Cool air from the suit recycler chilled the nape of her neck. She asked Dorothy over the suit comlink, "How do we get down?"

"Easy," Leo declared, giving her a shove. "Relax and try not to struggle."

Toppling into the shaft, Amy fell right out of the 1-g field, into a slowly accelerating descent. For the first time in her life, she felt the real tug of the cosmos, as smooth shaft walls slid by, gaining speed, going faster and faster.

Then the walls vanished, and she went flying out into the starry void, a tiny self-contained satellite in her vacuum suit. Glancing back, she saw the huge outer hull of the habitat, a gray, faceless wall, slowly receding from her. Dorothy and Leo appeared, two figures in silver suits, shooting out of the gray wall. Dorothy's suit began to broadcast:

MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY ...

Why May Day? It was August. Maybe dates were different in space.

Leo's voice cut in. "Saucer port opening."

Amy saw a bright slot appear in the huge gray wall. Three flat disks emerged from the slot.

"Saucers coming out," Leo announced. "Three of them!"

MAYDAY, MAYDAY ...

Amy watched the disks grow larger, heading right for them. Close up,

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they did look like pairs of saucers, one piled upside down atop the other.

Behind her, Dorothy called out, "Here comes the *Jackdaw*."

Silently, a spark separated from the stars, moving closer, and growing in size, becoming a mini-starship, a nuclear-armed Navy corvette.

Glancing back at the saucers, Amy saw that gaping ports had opened on the saucer bottoms. All set to scoop them up.

"Hellhounds loosed!" Leo shouted, as three smaller sparks separated from the *Jackdaw*. The effect on the saucers was miraculous. Instantly they closed their ports and sped away, firing off smaller decoys to confuse the missiles.

Not at all fooled, the Hellhounds streaked by, going straight after the fleeing saucers.

Which left the three of them floating alone in space.

Amy watched the *Jackdaw* expand into a long cylindrical ramscoop, with an arsenal of smart-nukes, and minimal crew quarters. Operating on gravity drive, the *Jackdaw* swept them up into the ramscoop, where automated grapples reeled them in.

Crew members helped Amy out of her suit and gave her ship's coveralls to replace her sodden scarecrow clothes. Dorothy helped her change into the strange, smooth, zip-sealing fabric. Now nothing of her world remained. Viewscreens showed the world she had left behind, looking like a great gray donut, hanging amid incredibly distant stars. Hard to believe that everything she knew was wrapped up inside. She asked Dorothy, "What will happen to me?"

"Hard to say." Dorothy sympathized with her dilemma. "But you can stay with me until you make up your mind."

"With you?" That sounded wonderful.

"I have a place in Kansas system," Dorothy explained. "Which is where we're headed. Eventually."

Right now they were headed nowhere. *Jackdaw* was in close orbit around the habitat, keeping watch on her world. Amy shook her head, admitting, "I don't understand any of this."

"Few folks do," Dorothy agreed. "Your world is a stolen habitat stashed in a dead system. Navy intelligence thinks it's a nest of slavers, and that's why *Jackdaw* keeps watch on the system. But they had no proof, so they asked for a Peace Corps investigation."

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"That's you?" Apparently peace and war went hand-in-hand.

"Exactly. I was supposed to take a closer look, and try to get evidence. DNA samples, that sort of thing."

"Like when I spit in that tube?"

Dorothy nodded. "You are related to five known slavers, either killed or DNA-identified — men who raided and kidnapped for profit." And who dealt in gene-altered oddities like Dorothy. "Two cousins, a paternal uncle, and both your grandfathers."

Father always said that before he "bought the farm" he had lived off-world; now she knew what he had been doing. And why family arguments never fazed him, so long as they were not settled with a blaster. Dorothy took her hand, a strangely parental gesture from someone a head shorter, saying, "You are living proof that this is a slaver haven, where retired slavers go to raise sons for ship's crews, and girls to pass around and enjoy."

It was fairly horrific to hear your world reduced to those terms, but this all started with her running away. "What will happen now?"

"Maybe nothing. In Kansas system there are folks who say that what happens out here is not our business." Dorothy did not think that way, having been saved from a slaver creche herself. "These are mostly retired slavers, absolutely bent on avoiding the law. Why not let them live out their golden years in peace? Civilized worlds only act when our own interests are at stake — that's what separates us from the barbarians."

Dorothy sounded sarcastic. Amy just stared at her world, orbiting through the void, all turned in on itself. Mom and Dad, Tuck and Nathan, Lilith, Delilah and Dot, all lived in there, along with everyone that Amy had ever known, everything she had ever seen before she turned thirteen. Hard to believe it. All Amy knew for sure was that one day she was coming back for Dot.

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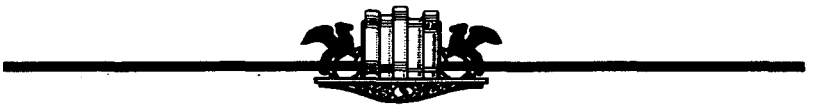

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Moon Called, by Patricia Briggs, Ace Books, 2006, $7.99.

Shadows in the Starlight, by Elaine Cunningham, Tor Books, 2006, $23.95.

PARDON ME if I sound like the old guy sitting down beside you at the bus stop who won't shut up about what it was like when he was a kid. But when I was a kid....

Seriously, having read fantasy since before it was a genre (it used to be marketed as part of sf), I've found it interesting to have watched fantasy as it split off from the sf ghetto into a whole little ghetto of its own.

In those early days, the new genre was either a riff on the Conanesque warrior, or some variation on the Tolkien books. And sometimes a combination of the two.

When fantasies with contemporary settings began to appear (such as Megan Lindholm's *Wizard of the Pigeons*, or R. A. MacAvoy's *Tea with the Black Dragon*), they were considered innovative and daring. And they did have that fresh feeling about them, even though authors such as James Branch Cabell had already done it long before. But for most contemporary readers, the early part of the twentieth century (Cabell's "contemporary setting," since he was writing of his own time) didn't feel as immediate as the latter part of the century in which they lived.

There weren't a lot of these books, but the few that came out took the real world and the fantasy elements seriously and were well-loved by the core audience reading them. Then, after a while, the innovations didn't feel quite so innovative anymore and the tropes of high fantasy seemed like they were simply grafted onto the contemporary settings.

As if to counteract that, we started to see a lot of humorous

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contemporary fantasies. Or books that combined the elements of the mystery genre with elves and dwarves, or more popularly, vampires and werewolves. Or, again, combinations of all of the above.

I was never much of a fan of any of that, although, like switching on the TV for some light entertainment, I'd browse them from time to time. Mostly they left me dissatisfied because they seemed to leave the best out of each genre. Humor stole the mythic underpinnings and sense of wonder from fantasy. From mysteries — especially the hardboiled style of mystery — it took away that sharp, unflinching narrator's voice with its commentary on social mores and the mess we can so easily make of our lives.

Humor in a hardboiled mystery is wry, or a kind of tough, wiseacre style, not slapstick or puns.

So I was happy to run into not one, but two authors recently who treat both their fantasy and mystery elements seriously, while not forgetting that you can have fun without buffoonery.

Patricia Briggs's *Moon Called* is the better of the two. It's set in a contemporary America about ten years after it's been revealed that some of the lesser fairies (hobs, gremlins) are real, but the world remains unaware of the more powerful and dangerous beings still living hidden among humans.

Like werewolves, vampires, and witches.

Mercy Thompson is a mechanic. She's also a shapechanger raised by werewolves. She can take a coyote's shape, but she's not bound by the clan affiliations of the werewolves, which suits her just fine because all she wants is to be left alone. The werewolves run in packs and they're forever on call, as it were, to the alpha male pack leader. Mercy's more independent than that and has managed to keep her distance and her own space.

Until a runaway shows up at her garage, looking for work, who also happens to be a new werewolf — a danger to both himself and those around him. And everything goes rapidly downhill from there.

Mercy's not a P.I. or a policeman, but as the body count rises and the mysteries deepen, it seems that she's the only one who can objectively investigate the problems, although doing so puts her on the outs with pretty much everyone in her life.

I liked this book because it was inventive and fast-paced without sacrificing characterization. The histories and "world" of the fae are

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integrated seamlessly into the narrative, and Mercy's first person narrative voice is a treat throughout. And best of all, the fantasy elements retain their dark mystery and sense of wonder — even though they're being described from the perspective of a shapechanger.

It's an entertaining book from start to end, and although that end is satisfying as it is, the characters, and Mercy's voice, are so likable that I could easily visit with her in another novel.

In *Shadows in the Starlight*, Elaine Cunningham's lead character Gwen Gellman is an ex-cop and a P.I. who appears to specialize in missing persons cases, especially those involving teens and young children. It could be because she's an orphan herself with a less than happy upbringing.

The book starts with a murder, and then a chapter from the viewpoint of some of the antagonists, before we settle mostly into Gellman's third-person perspective as she starts work on the case of a missing wife and child. Things, as one would expect, immediately get complicated, particularly because the case seems tied to the mysteries of Gellman's own elfin heritage.

Yes, this time it's elves living hidden from us — dark and scary elves who seem to have more kinship with the Mafia than forest legends, though there's also an edge of Neo-Nazism with the elves' focus on racial purity and the "Qualities" for which their young are bred. Each of them has three Qualities, but until all three manifest, there's no way to tell if the breeding has been a success.

Gellman has manifested two of her Qualities and much is made of what will happen when her third manifests. But while the plot dances around that, making it a major focus of the book, it doesn't get resolved. (More on that in a moment.)

First let me say that Cunningham has a terrific command of pacing and characterization. Her prose has just that right blend of edginess and wry humor that makes a hardboiled mystery such a delight, and I loved this book right up until I got to the end.

The end of the book, that is. Which is not the end of the story. Cunningham does the unforgivable (for me, at least) by breaking the contract between writer and reader in not resolving her story. Now I know that series books are here to stay, but looking at *Shadows in the Starlight*, there's no way to tell that all you're getting is only a partial story. To all intents and purposes, it pretends to be a stand-alone volume:

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"a Changeling Detective novel" is all it says on the cover. One assumes that the author and her publishers know the definition of the word "novel," in a literary sense.

Now I knew going in that there was a previous book, and Cunningham did a fine job in keeping a new reader up to speed, but while some plot lines resolve, the principle ones, the ones that drive the characterization and are why we care about Gellman and keep reading, are just left to hang.

I don't know why authors do this. It seems to me it boils down to one of three reasons: 1) laziness — they can't be bothered wrapping up plot elements; 2) incompetence — they're not capable of properly finishing a book; or 3) avarice — they feel they need to leave hooks in the current book to make sure that readers will go on to pick up their next one (although that might also be a case of a lack of confidence in their work).

Or perhaps they don't read enough books themselves. Instead, they watch TV dramas with their season-long arcs and cliff-hanger episodes, forgetting that viewers can tune in a week later to find out what happens next, instead of the year it takes the reader to get another installment. But the real telling point with TV drama is that you know the story won't be finished until the end of the season. With *Shadows in the Starlight* there is no indication that the reader is only getting a partial story.

You might think I'm being snippy because I'm having a bad day as I write this, but not so. I just take that contract between writer and reader seriously, and become very annoyed when the writer doesn't deliver, or cheats.

If you'd like a concise analogy of why I feel this way, it was like being invited to dinner, but when I got there, I was given only a few appetizers and then sent on my way.

Shame on both Cunningham and Tor.

My advice? Don't buy this book unless you enjoy being left frustrated. Or at least wait until the full story is published in however many volumes it takes (though considering how informative the cover of this book is, it's hard to say how you'd ever know when it actually does come to a conclusion).

Cell, by Stephen King, Scribner's, 2006, $26.95.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of Stephen King's retirement were greatly exaggerated. Not only does he have this new novel in the

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bookstores, but there's another book due out in October (you get a handwritten snippet of it at the end of this one).

It has been almost thirty years since King first gave us a take on the end of the world (do I need to mention that was *The Stand*?), and while *Cell* is certainly reminiscent of *The Stand*, the differences are big enough to warrant his revisit to the theme.

The reason the world ends seems as arbitrary as the virus that wiped out most of humanity in the earlier book. This time it's a "pulse" transmitted by cell phones. If you use a cell, it wipes your brain clean. The afflicted are struck with a murderous rage before they descend into a kind of zombie state. Eventually they begin to "flock" and evolve into having the appearance of a group mind.

The idea might seem a little preposterous — that so many could be affected — but you only have to walk down any city street and note the number of people with a phone pressed up against their ear. And since so many people carry cell phones, when they see the carnage and chaos created by the first wave of the afflicted, it's only natural for them to use those cells to phone their loved ones, or 911, and so become similarly afflicted.

But the how and why of the end of the world isn't important. Again, as in *The Stand*, what King is really interested in is how the horror affects ordinary people. This time, however, he's telling a smaller story. Instead of a large cast, spread across North America, he's dealing with only a few people and the setting is confined to New England.

There are a lot gruesome scenes as the afflicted first begin their murderous rampage — and quite a few scattered through the rest of the book. I mention this because, although *Cell* is a fascinating character study, you need a rather strong stomach. But if that much graphic description doesn't bother you, this is a tremendously engaging novel. Do I need to say how much you'll love the characters? Or how it's almost impossible to put the book down? Because this is King writing at the top of his considerable strengths as an author.

Oh, and considering the subject matter of the book, I really had to smile at the tag line to King's short bio on the dustwrapper: "He does not own a cell phone."

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Books

JAMES SALLIS

River of Gods, by Ian McDonald, Pyr, 2006, $25.

BACK IN the day, in honors English, as I watched out the window — dinosaurs tall as the palm trees, New Orleans taking on the sickly sweet reek of springtime magnolia — Dr. Roppolo would talk a lot, as was the fashion then, about appearance and reality. Both dinosaurs and New Orleans are gone now. And some days I don't feel too good myself.

Appearance and reality.

Being and its manifestations. Its avatars.

Science fiction has a many-chambered heart. From its inception it has purported, by exaggeration and anticipation, to predict our futures, to preimagine or prefigure them for us. But it also connects with something much deeper within, reaching down almost casually to that pool of shadow figures and archetypes from which issue all our folktales, religions, and fantasies. It is a literature with its feet planted squarely in the mud of storytelling and its eyes (often quite literally) on the stars. This double strain — the push-pull toward commercialism and its pulp tradition, *and* toward the literary, prophetic, and fabulist — has constantly driven and re-energized the genre.

Then every so often there comes along a novel, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, say, or China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, or Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, that seems to do it all. Extrapolation, a sense of wonder that grabs you by the throat and won't let go, lush carpets of setting, a profusion of ideas, complex representations of characters, soundings of society at every level, all the resources of language.

River of Gods is such a novel.

"The body turns in the stream. Where the new bridge crosses the Ganga in five concrete strides, garlands

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of sticks and plastic snag around the footings; rafts of river flotsam. For a moment the body might join them, a dark hunch in the black stream. The smooth flow of water hauls it, spins it around, shies it feet first through the arch of steel and traffic. Overhead trucks roar across the high spans. Day and night, convoys bright with chrome work, gaudy with gods, storm the bridge into the city, blaring filmi music from their roof speakers. The shallow water shivers."

A dark hunch in the stream. Shies. Gaudy with gods. The river *shivers.*

Relax. You're in the hands of a master.

And just as Atman gathers, not by unfolding out of some absolute, but from accumulation, from the merging of lower level entities, so does Ian McDonald's novel come together from thousands of paragraphs just like that one.

It is 2047, and India, as of its hundredth birthday, has split into a dozen smaller states. Much of the activity centers around Bharat and its capital Varanasi, perched beside the mighty Ganges that flows from the Himalayas down through plain after plain to the Bay of Bengal. For three years now the monsoon has failed, and water is in perilously short supply. Bharat is on the verge of war (like all wars partly diversionary, partly ideologic, largely economic) with neighboring state Awadh over this, and over an illegally constructed dam. Meanwhile, in desperate hope of affecting climate change, Bengalis tow a vast iceberg toward the Bay of Bengal.

Shiv, moments from stepping onstage in the passage above, is the first we see of the clutch of central characters around whom the events of the novel revolve. He is out harvesting ovaries for sale — yes, the ovaries from that body newly adrift in Mother Ganga. And he is about to discover that his unsavory livelihood has been made redundant by technological advances.

Next we meet Mr. Nandha the ever-so-proper Krishna Cop, on his way to excommunicate an AI that has come into self-awareness at an outlying factory and "turned on its masters," and that must be stopped from escaping or out-copying itself. Sanctions exist against harboring AIs or developing them beyond certain parameters, but there is, of course, a black market in illegals.

"It's an inspection robot, a little clambering spider-monkey thing.... All it knows is that these creatures want to kill it, and it wants to exist."

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The subprograms that Mr. Nandha uses, even the gun with which he dispatches the little AI, bear the names of Hindu deities — the very names that rogue AIs take for themselves.

So it goes, as we meet:

Shaheen Badoor Khan, Muslim assistant to a Hindu Prime Minister, a man secretly drawn to those who have "stepped aside" and had themselves neutered;

Najia, the reporter who snoops out Khan's secret and suddenly finds herself a conduit for much more than the entertainment she has hitherto passed off as (and believed to be) news;

Tal, the nute who helped create the immensely popular soap opera whose virtual star has a virtual "life" apart ("This is the meta-soap department, where Lal Darfan gets the script he doesn't think he follows. It's got to the stage where the meta-soap's as big as the soap itself");

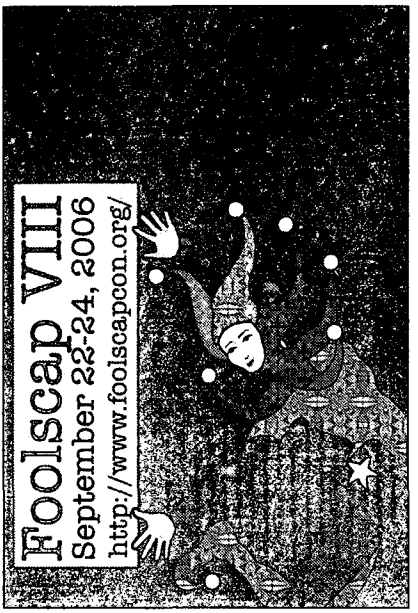
Vishram Ray, the stand-up comic who fled India for Scotland and returns to shepherd the family business's research in zero-point-energy, a business backed by a mysterious investor, research that proves a major fulcrum for the plot;

Lisa Durnau, scientist and creator of Alterre, "the parallel Earth evolving in accelerated time on eleven and a half million Real-World computers," who in a radical sort of eminent domain is scooped up ("vanished") by her own government;

Thomas Lull, Lisa's mentor, now mysteriously vanished himself, and apparently close to the heart of the novel's full mystery;

Aj, rewired, remade as a human interface to the newborn AI calling itself Brahma.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nandha must seek out and excommunicate at all costs that Third Generation AI just manifest in Varanasi.



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And then there is the asteroid captured by Earth's gravitational pull, the one with the message from an AI older than the universe itself, a message addressed to three of our characters.

As, all the while, slow missiles creep toward their targets, armor-plated Mercedes cruise blithely past the basest of beggars, debt collection (like war) is carried on by robotic devices outsourced from the U.S. and "manned" by couch-potato gamers, and elective abortion has made women a scarcity in Hindu society, valued ever more highly even as their roles and lives become ever more severely delimited.

Cascades of ideas. A cadence that never lets down, accelerating from its slow opening movements to *molto presto*. Language synched to the rhythms, the hard trip and fall, of city and heart.

River of Gods clamors and roars and rings and resounds. In form it's a thriller — horizontal, to use Todorov's critical term — but the *story's* story is very much vertical, penetrating acutely into the lives of its characters and the "life" of a new society.

That society is one of great disparities, unimaginable wealth jutted up against the most unconscionable poverty, technology of the loftiest pedigree developing in buildings below which the superstitious still wash in the Ganges and commit their dead to it.

India, Ian McDonald has said in interview, is an assault on mind, body and spirit. Growing up in Belfast with an Irish mother and Scottish father, he felt always the outsider, developing a lifelong fascination with divided societies, with the wounds and energies they can engender.

"In Belfast, you're left with no doubt that you're at the very butt-end of Empire: Britain's first and last colony. J. G. Ballard is rightly regarded as the sibyl of the Imperial twilight — he writes from the point of view of the colonizer, me from the point of view of the colony."

His next major work, he says, will concern Brazil.

McDonald freely admits influences, pointing out that all literature is in dialogue with itself, and that, in *River of Gods*, he quite self-consciously reworked elements from *Midnight's Children*, *A Suitable Boy*, and ("of course") *Stand on Zanzibar*, one of four novels in which John Brunner attemped full-tilt, Balzacian, Dos Passos-like portraits of future societies — politics, scientific advances and shifting cultural "givens," future lifestyles,

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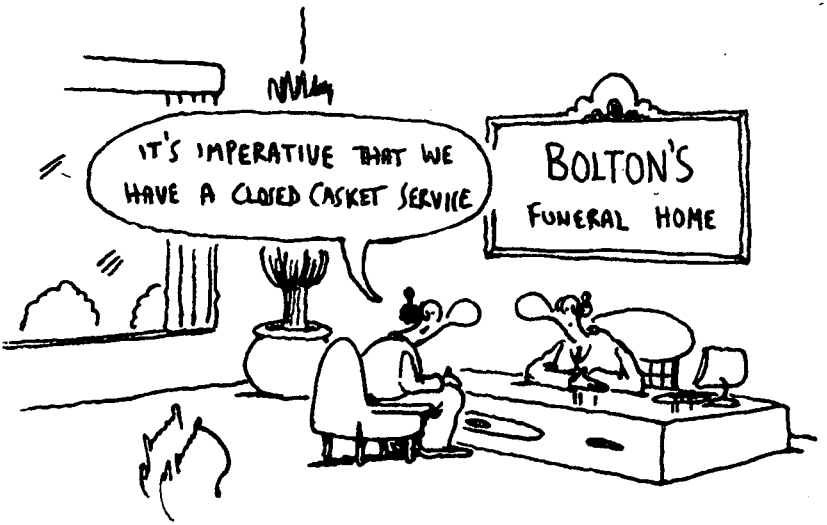
the textures of the day among every class and at every level of society — in journalistic detail. (The other Brunner novels are *Jagged Orbit*, *The Sheep Look Up*, and *The Shockwave Rider*.)

Brunner was also in some ways a precursor to cyberpunk, the catch-term often used for McDonald's work. In the case of *River of Gods*, McDonald suggests, instead, *khyberpunk* — "khyberpunk being to cyberpunk what Bollywood is to Hollywood...something much gaudier and madder."

"Everything," a character notes early in the novel, reflecting on Lal, the virtual soap-opera star with a parallel virtual life, "is a version." Appearance and reality.

And so *River of Gods*, with rare grace and power, goes about its business, illuminating the fundamental truth at the bedrock of our experience and at the heart of all our folklore, all our religions, the single thing of which we must keep reminding ourselves, the face behind all the masks: that the best of which mankind is capable and the worst are intertwined in each of us: that the figurations of our nightmares so closely resemble the avatars of our dreams.



Pandora's funeral

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Steven Popkes's previous contributions to our pages include "Tom Kelley's Ghost" and "The Great Caruso." Like many of his stories, his latest is deceptively quiet—it doesn't have loud car chases or big-budget special effects, but it's very effective nonetheless.

Holding Pattern

By Steven Popkes

THOMAS COBAN LOOKED OVER his cup of coffee, out his kitchen window, past the alleyway and toward the river, to watch the drones hovering outside his window watching him. A single Russian EX400, looking like nothing more than a lumbering blimp, suggested the Kremlin felt comfortable with the world today. America wanted some attention since he could see at least a dozen wasp-sized 1200s, each a meticulous clockwork of pinhead sensors and cameras. Behind them all, hovering narrow and lethal, were four Israeli Darts. Jerusalem was feeling insecure. Beyond that, it was more or less a standard mix. He recognized about twenty different models. There were a few new unidentifiable workhorses obviously purchased from one of the standard suppliers and included in his entourage for the sake of prestige.

He watched them and, like always, felt a faint shiver at the amount of deadly force arrayed outside his window. Remember, he told himself, they're like a pack of wild dogs: don't attack and don't run. They'll kill you if you run.

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One more day, he thought. You have to count them one at a time. One more day to be alive.

His room was austere: a room to sleep in, a couch in front of the feed and a kitchenette off to one side. He could eat, sleep, and watch the world without walking more than five steps. From the outside, his building was unremarkable: a beige apartment building, slant shadows in the Albuquerque sun. Its chief distinguishing feature was the cloud of small aircraft, none larger than crows, hovering near his third-floor window.

It was still February and the predawn weather was crisp when he stepped outside in his running suit. Tomas kept himself nondescript. He had shaved off his trademark mustache and let his hair grow. He purchased clothing that imitated the styles of those he saw around him so he could blend in. Tomas even went so far as to lighten his normally dark skin so that he no longer looked like a *mestizo* but more like an upper class Mexican or an Italian. His only distinguishing mark was the cloud of drones that followed him everywhere he went.

Ah, he thought. Who knows? Someday things could change.

He looked around and rubbed his hands, then started jogging. Some of the drones liked to stay eye level with him, watching his face — this was a particular feature of the American devices. Americans liked media and it bled through even into their automated surveillance systems. Other countries didn't care as long as they were within a specific striking distance from him. He turned off Central Avenue and started on the trail that led up to San Gabriel Park.

Dawn cracked over the horizon and turned the twilight into sharp-edged day. The sandstone glittered along the trail and the scrub pine looked as if it had been edged in black.

Coban liked to rest briefly on a particular bench looking down over the Rio Grande. As he rounded a bend in the trail, he stopped. Someone else was sitting on his habitual bench. Someone with his own cloud of drones.

He slowed to a walk as he approached the bench. The man on the bench was sitting, fiddling with a cane and drawing his jacket close around himself. He looked up at Coban. Coban could see the contours and shapes of his own face looking back at him. Not the same, of course. Their faces

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had been created nearly twenty years ago and the mileage on each had been different. This man had never pursued anonymity with Coban's intensity. But the resemblance was still close enough to see.

"Tomas Tikal," said the man on the bench. He fiddled with his cane again.

"Tomas Coban," Coban replied.

"I know. I've been expecting you." Tikal smiled briefly.

Coban shrugged and sat next to him. He looked up and watched the drones circle each other, each executing intricate handshake maneuvers to determine the other's authenticity. A brief flash and one of Tikal's drones flared and fell to the ground.

"I was wondering about that one," Tikal said dryly. "I suppose its signature didn't match up."

"What are you doing here?" Coban asked. "We're not supposed to seek each other out."

"That's not exactly true." Tikal crossed his arms against the cold and Coban wondered where he had been living for the last twenty years. "We're allowed to interact under precisely controlled conditions and when we're thoroughly monitored." He waved to the drones. "I think we're being monitored sufficiently."

"What do you want?"

Tikal didn't answer. Instead, he watched the drones fly over them. "Things would have been completely different if it had been the French that had taken us down. They would have picked one of us at random, declared him the right one and executed him."

Coban stared at him. What was going on here? "If it had been the Russians, we would all be dead the moment a glorious victory was declared. A quick mock trial and then on to the next. So what? Our own people wouldn't have needed a trial or proof. You know that. Only the Americans were interested. And then only because we slaughtered some American nuns." Coban glanced away. It wouldn't do to let Tikal watch his face too closely. They were alike enough Tikal might be able to detect what he was thinking. "They should have killed us and been done with it. That's what I would have done."

Tikal laughed. "Me, also. A peculiarity of the American psychology, do you think? The messianic determination to blame a single human face

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for a crime. Hitler, Pol Pot, Hussein, Ho Chi Minh. Now, Tomas. That could be why they have kept us in custody."

"Perhaps." He thought about his so-called brothers. There were seven of them: each changed to resemble Tomas. All of them had the same plastic surgery scars on face, hands, and feet. At first they were thought to be clones, but DNA comparisons dispelled that immediately. It would have been easier if they had been clones. Tomas, the original Tomas who must have been hiding among them, had mixed samples of his own DNA with the others in all of the places where he had been known to reside. A bed where Tomas had been known to sleep had skin and hair from all seven of them. A razor with which he had cut his face was stained with multiple samples of blood. Bloody Tomas, without kin, without family, without even a surname, had disappeared in plain sight.

After several years of investigation, the Americans gave up and decided they could not determine which of the seven was the real Tomas. Each was given a surname according to where they had been found: Tulate, Tikal, Coban, Dolores, Pasion, San Jose, and Livingston.

Coban ached for a cigarette. As far as he knew, it had been six years since he'd had one — if he, in fact, had ever smoked at all. Perhaps, Tomas had smoked and bequeathed the addiction to him without tobacco ever staining his lips.

Coban looked back at Tikal. He had not aged well. He was heavier and his cheeks sank from his face as if the skin were disconnected from the tissue beneath. Maybe he had been older than the rest of them. This could be the result of mere aging.

"So this is what you are doing now? Crossing the country to speak with old friends?"

Tikal blew through his teeth and said nothing for a moment. "Tulate is dead. Heart attack. Dolores would only speak with me if I bought him dinner and then he didn't say much. Pasion wouldn't speak to me at all. I spent an hour shouting through his closed door. San Jose was in the hospital for a gallstone operation. He had trouble speaking but he had no difficulty making it clear to me I was to leave him alone. Livingston was the only one glad to see me. He wanted to borrow money. So, no. I can't say I've been a popular visitor." He glanced furtively at Coban, then returned to watching the drones.

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"Cheer up." Coban smiled. "I'm not displeased to see you."

"Such an enthusiastic greeting for your brother."

Coban shrugged. "Take what you can get."

Tikal said in a low whisper. "Did you remember anything?"

"Nothing," Coban replied in a normal voice. He gestured toward the drone. "They hear everything whether you want them to or not. I remember nothing more than I did the day I was captured."

The boundaries of Coban's memory were precise. They began when he took power and ended just before he altered them himself. Memories of his childhood, his country of origin, his original ethnic heritage, were absent. Only the method of the alteration could be determined. Any record of additional manipulation, any pirate changes or traps, had been removed. When he awoke, he knew only that he was Tomas, had turned Guatemala into a bloody police state for fifteen years only to be deposed by the Americans. His last memory was his own face, shining down on him from a mirror over the table, his smile rigid, his jowls heavy, his mustache narrow and dark, his head shaved and shrouded in a nest of cables. Then, his face had dissolved into a formless brown mist, eyes, ears, cables, and finally that smile. The memory was obviously contrived: a signature to the changes in his mind and a defiant insult thrown at the Americans who would inevitably be able to retrieve it.

"Maybe you're right," Tikal said. "Maybe they should have killed us. Or kept us in prison."

"Even genocidal tyrants suffer changes in fashion," snapped Coban. "For God's sake, Tikal. It's been six years since we were released and you're sniffing around me *now*? What do you want?"

"I've come to apologize."

"Apologize?" Coban shook his head. "What for?"

"I am the real Tomas," he said matter-of-factly. "I can say it now. I am *allowing* myself to say it now."

Coban stared at him. *This* he had not expected.

"I have come to each of you," Tikal continued. "To apologize for taking away your faces, your memories, and your lives."

"No apology to the thousands of people we killed? Surely we can spare a tear for them. Or the three hundred American soldiers we

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slaughtered? I wouldn't cry for them, but I suppose we could manage to toss them a couple of bucks — "

"Stop it!"

Coban tilted his head and watched Tikal for a moment. "Did I struggle?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Did I resist? Or did I volunteer?"

"It doesn't matter — "

"You are wrong," Coban said, interrupting him. "If I volunteered, then you have nothing for which to apologize."

"I took your face — "

" — which I may have freely given." Coban turned aside and let it go. "Where have you been?"

"To all of you, one at a time."

"No doubt. But I meant where have you been all this time? Where did they station you?"

Tikal didn't say anything for a moment. "Washington."

"Ah," Coban said dryly and fell silent.

"What do you mean?"

Coban spread his hands. "I meant nothing by it."

"It sounded...critical."

Coban watched the drones. They had settled into a figure eight pattern over their heads, each group chasing the other. "We have the same memories. It seems more than coincidental that the one who determines himself to be the original has all this time been quartered in the capital of those who deposed us."

"None of the others questioned me like this."

Coban shrugged. "We began with different brains even though we had the same memories and motivations. Some differences were bound to show up. What happens now?"

Tikal looked uncertain. "I want absolution. I sent thousands to their death in the weapons breeding camps at Playa Grande. I struck down the Americans with parasites at the battle of Campur. I forced my own people to march on the Americans and then detonated the toxins in their bodies as soon as the battle was engaged. *I did terrible things.*"

Coban patted him on the arm. "Yes. Yes. I know. I have the same

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memories. But who is to say it was you? The Americans? It could have been any of us. Truth be told, it could have been *all* of us. We were all there. We were all present at these places at one time or another. Perhaps we all gave some of the orders. Would that make you feel better?"

"All of us?" Tikal said faintly.

Coban let his gaze wander over the river. How curious the same river that borders Texas is also here, so many hundreds of miles away. "I think Tomas emasculated us at the end. He took from us the memories that made him what he was. Could you have truly done what we remember doing?"

Tikal shook his head.

"Nor I." Coban stared at the water. "Tomas was a sociopath, obviously. Perhaps I am — perhaps *we* are — as well. But to express your pathology on such a grand scale." Coban sighed. "I am not capable of that."

Tikal stared at him, horrified. He stamped his cane on the ground. "You feel no remorse for what he did?"

"What difference would it make if I did? Would one village remain unslaughtered if I managed to feel bad about it?" Coban held up his hands. "Besides, Tomas changed our memories and altered our minds. Can we truly be considered the same person? Have we not been absolved by that alteration?"

Tikal shrank back against the bench.

"Who am I, anyway?" continued Coban, leaning forward. "A timid professor? A coerced peasant? A rabid volunteer? I can never know. Or am I the man who attempted, however misguided, to modernize my home country? To bring them electricity, water, roads? At the expense of some of their lives, I grant you. Which would you rather be? Tomas or what you were, knowing that what you were is forever gone? The alternative to being Tomas is to be nothing."

Tikal seemed to huddle into himself. "What I did was wrong."

"You sound like a little boy crying to his father. Is *that* what they did to you in Washington?" Coban looked at him speculatively. "Maybe you are the original. Perhaps repentance for the act can only come from someone in whose brain still resides those deeper synapses and circuits." He leaned toward him. "I can only remember from when I took power to

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seeing my own face before I went into the machine. Can you remember beyond that? Think, man."

Tikal shook his head. "No. But what I did in power, I remember. And what I remember, I repent. I have thought on it for years. I sit on the patio outside my house — "

"A house? You have a house?" Coban stood and paced. "It becomes clear. You must have been suspected from the very beginning. Do you remember meeting any of us before we were captured? I only remember meeting you, and the rest, when they brought us to Leonard Wood. The seven of us, copies all, sitting in that room staring at each other. One by one they took us and I never saw any of the others again until today. After all the questioning and the testing, you were the one they picked to work on. I was sent here to sit on my ass and wait for judgment, or so I thought. All the time, I was a *spare*. A *control*. Something against which they measured you. Oh, the skill! Oh, the pure deviousness of it! Tomas would have been proud."

Tikal relaxed slowly. "I am the original, then. I wasn't sure. They told me I was and I wanted to believe them — to feel remorse, I told myself. Someone should feel remorse. I shouldn't be here working my garden, petting my cat. Eating in a restaurant."

"A garden," Coban repeated dryly as he sat down. "I have a tiny apartment over an alley."

"But I wanted it to be my garden. My cat."

"So it is," pronounced Coban. "It is all yours."

"Yes. I am the original."

Coban watched Tikal speculatively for a long time. "Certainly, somebody has to be. If we are all unmanned, certainly you are more emasculated than the rest of us. It is only right you should be proclaimed the original."

Tikal looked at him. "'Proclaimed'?"

"Tomas escaped. That has to be it. We are *all* copies. You were the one most likely to serve as his sacrificial lamb."

Tikal stared at him anxiously. "He couldn't have escaped. They looked everywhere and they found us. There were all the clues: the DNA, the faces. He couldn't have escaped."

Coban laughed. "Tomas was a genius. He staged us all to make it seem

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as if he were hiding among us. But think: such an arrogant egomaniac as Tomas, which you and I can clearly see for ourselves better than anyone, would never erase himself merely to survive. He made us up to be him and then disguised himself and left. After all this time, the Americans have never found him. Then, the time comes and *you* repent and somebody in Washington says, 'Maybe we were wrong. Maybe Tomas did hide a pearl among pearls. At long last, he repents of his crimes. Could he be the real Tomas?' And another, more powerful and wiser man says, 'Even if Tomas escaped, he is old and surely near death and cannot hurt us.' And perhaps an even more powerful and still wiser man says, 'It does not matter for this is the Tomas we have. Let us release him to seek his fellows and watch what he does.' So, *Tomas*. You've seen us all. What shall you do?"

"I am the real Tomas," Tikal said.

Tikal jumped up from the bench and ran down along the river. For a moment, the drones stilled their flight. More than half of them shot after Tikal.

Tikal stopped then, perhaps a hundred feet away. Coban could tell from his movements, Tikal had planned this for some time. Good for you, he thought.

Tikal fiddled with his cane for a moment, then rushed the drones, leaping up at them and beating at them with his cane. Tikal would never have hit any of them but several fell. He must have a device in the cane, thought Coban. For a moment, Coban thought he might actually manage it.

The drones hesitated, then two of the Israeli Darts shot forward. With a strangled cry, Tikal collapsed. Coban grinned sourly. It fit that the Americans would make sure to keep their own hands clean.

Coban watched for a moment. The police would be here soon. One could always trust to American ingenuity and thoroughness. He left the park and jogged back toward his apartment.

As he ran, one by one, his own entourage of drones detached themselves and left him. The Israelis were already gone. Coban watched them: first the unidentified insects, then one country after another, as they were no doubt informed by the Americans that Tomas was dead. Finally, the Russian blimp lumbered away. By the time Coban reached Central Avenue, only the American drones remained. He was as close to alone as he had ever been in fifteen years.

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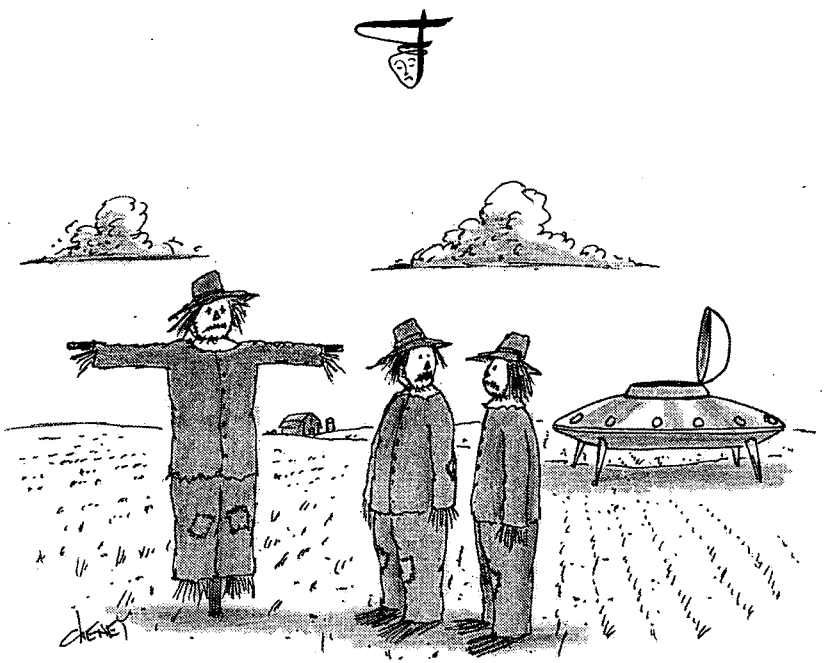
Coban stepped into his building. The wasps followed him outside, following his heat signature as faithfully as wives. That was all right. He could deal with a few of them.

The time had come, he thought. When he never thought it would come at all. He remembered his own face, Tomas's face, staring back at him. In hindsight, it did seem to him, that Tomas did resemble Tikal somewhat more than he did. Perhaps Tikal was the original after all.

But it did not matter to Coban any more than it mattered to Tomas. Tomas was an idealist. He had wanted to create a vision of the world. Whether he accomplished it biologically or through a creature imprinted with his personality made no difference to him.

Tomas Coban spread his arms in the windowed sun. It was good to be alive.



"Let's get the hell out of here."

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Terry Bisson lives in California where he writes shorter and shorter stories and co-hosts the monthly "SF in SF" reading series with poet Adam Cornford. On Amazon.com, he commented that "My 'Billy' stories are an attempt to capture in words, like a fly in corn syrup, the joy and the nightmare of being young. They're perfect for reading aloud to children you hope never to see again."

Billy and the Unicorn

By Terry Bisson

ONE DAY BILLY SAW A UNICORN. He could tell what it was by the big horn growing out of its head. It was standing at the edge of the woods.

"Want a unicorn?" the unicorn asked. It was white.

Billy shook his head. "Girls like unicorns," he said. "I'm a boy."

"Boys would like unicorns too," said the unicorn, "if they knew what unicorns were really like."

Billy thought about that. "What are they really like?" he asked.

"Take me home and you'll see," said the unicorn.

"You're too big," said Billy.

"Yes, but unicorns don't eat anything," said the unicorn. "Plus, we're invisible."

Billy took the unicorn home. It was hard to get it in the door. His mother couldn't see it, though.

He put it in his room and stood it in the corner. Its horn glowed in the dark.

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"Turn out that light," said Billy's mother. "Go to sleep."

Cool! thought Billy. She could see the light but not the unicorn.

Billy hung a T-shirt over the unicorn's horn. It looked like a little ghost in the dark.

"Hey," said Billy.

The unicorn was going to the bathroom.

"You can't go to the bathroom in my room," said Billy.

"Too late," said the unicorn. A big blue jewel dropped down between its legs.

It was as big as a Brussels sprout. It had lots of square sides.

"Pick it up," said the unicorn.

"No way," said Billy.

After a while, the blue jewel disappeared.

"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper. "Unicorn Escapes from Zoo."

"I thought they were make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"It went to the bathroom in my room," said Billy.

"Shut up," said Billy's father. "Go to your room. Both of you."

When Billy got back to his room, the unicorn was going to the bathroom again.

"Hey," said Billy.

"Go ahead, pick it up," said the unicorn. "It doesn't stink."

Billy picked it up. It was warm, but it didn't stink.

"It's like money," said the unicorn. "You can buy magazines with it."

Billy liked magazines. He went to the store and picked one out.

"Dale Earnhardt," said the store owner. "That's a special memorial issue. Got any money?"

Billy shook his head.

"Then you're out of luck," said the store owner. "He was one of the Greats."

"This is like money," said Billy. He showed the store owner the blue jewel. It was still warm.

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The store owner sniffed it. "You get two for that," he said. He gave Billy another magazine. It was all about girls.

"I don't like girls," said Billy.

"Give it to your unicorn," said the store owner.

"Did you really escape from the zoo?" Billy asked.

"No," said the unicorn. It was looking at the girls. Billy had to turn the pages. The unicorn had no hands.

"The paper says you did."

"I planted that story," said the unicorn. "There is no zoo."

Billy thought about that.

"Turn the page," said the unicorn.

"I thought you didn't like girls," said Billy.

"These aren't wearing any clothes," said the unicorn. "It's their clothes I don't like."

"Can I ride on your back?" Billy asked.

"After you go to bed," said the unicorn.

That night Billy rode the unicorn around the yard. Its horn was like a headlight. It left little tracks in the sandbox.

"How come my mother can't see you?" Billy asked.

"She never tried," said the unicorn. "Plus, unicorns are invisible."

"How come I can see you, then?"

"We're not that invisible," said the unicorn.

Billy thought about that. "Can I take you to school?" he asked.

"Unicorns don't like school," said the unicorn.

Billy was watching TV when the phone rang.

It was the store owner. "I want my magazines back," he said. "That jewel disappeared."

"It's like money," said Billy.

"Money doesn't disappear," said the store owner. "Bring back my magazines or I will call the FBI."

"I'm not afraid of the FBI," said Billy.

But he was. His hands were trembling as he hung up the phone.

"Who was that?" asked Billy's mother.

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"Nobody," said Billy.

"Where's my Dale Earnhardt magazine?" asked Billy. He couldn't find it anywhere.

"I found out he's dead," said the unicorn. "So I tore it up with my horn."

"Oh no," said Billy. "He was one of the Greats."

"Dead people don't belong in magazines," said the unicorn.

"The store owner wants his magazines back," said Billy. He tried to get the girl magazine back but the unicorn was standing on it. It had sharp feet like a deer.

"You're going to get us both in trouble," said Billy. "He'll call the FBI."

"Just turn the page," said the unicorn. "Let me worry about him."

"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper. "Store Owner Killed by Unicorn."

"I thought they were make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"It's invisible," said Billy. "It has a sharp horn."

"Shut up, both of you," said Billy's father.

"That was cool," said Billy. "But I think you should hide somewhere else." He was getting tired of the unicorn.

"I like here," said the unicorn. "But I need another magazine. I'm finished with this one."

Billy had an idea. "You would like it at school," he said. "There are lots of girls there."

"Do they wear clothes?" asked the unicorn. "It's their clothes I don't like."

"Girls like unicorns," said Billy. "They will let you look up their dresses."

The next day, Billy took the unicorn to school. The teacher couldn't see it. The boys couldn't either.

The girls could, though. "Billy has a unicorn," they said, clapping their hands together. "Can we ride on it?"

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"You can have it," said Billy. He was tired of the unicorn. "Jewels come out of its butt."

"That's cool," said the girls. "It can sleep in the girls' bathroom."

"It doesn't sleep," said Billy.

"Get on," said the unicorn. It took all the girls for a ride. It looked up their dresses as they got on and off.

"What's going on?" asked the boys.

Billy told them about the unicorn. "It's invisible," he said. He left out the part about the store owner.

"Invisible stuff is make-believe," said the boys. "Plus, unicorns are strictly for girls."

"Boys would like unicorns too, if they knew what they were really like," said Billy.

But the boys couldn't see it. "Billy has a unicorn," they said. "Billy the girl!"

They made fun of Billy.

This was their big mistake.

"Home from school already?" asked Billy's mother.

"They let us out early," said Billy.

"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper at the supper table. "Unicorn Kills School Boys."

"That must be why they let Billy out early," said Billy's mother. "It was a tragedy."

"It says here that it tore them up with its horn," said Billy's father. "Then it ran into the girls' bathroom."

"Girls like unicorns," said Billy's mother.

"The teacher called the FBI," said Billy's father. "They will investigate."

"It wasn't my fault," said Billy.

"Nobody said it was," said Billy's father. "Pass the Brussels sprouts."

"I'm pretty sure unicorns are make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"Boys would like unicorns too if they knew what they were really like," said Billy.

"No they wouldn't," said Billy's father. "Now shut up, both of you."

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Matthew Hughes has been one of our most prolific—and most popular—contributors in recent years. His stories are all set in the penultimate age of Old Earth (one eon before Jack Vance's Dying Earth). Most of his stories have featured either Henghis Hapthorn or Guth Bandar, but here we meet a somewhat shady fellow by name of Luff Imbry. (Fans of Henghis Hapthorn, take note of the forthcoming novel, Majestrum, *which is due out later this year.)*

The Meaning of Luff

By Matthew Hughes

WELLIVER TUNG HAD OWED Luff Imbry a sum of money for longer than was advisable. The amount was more than five thousand hepts, Imbry's commission on the return to their owner of certain items that had gone astray late one evening when Tung found herself in the objects' presence while passing through the private rooms of the financier Hundegar Abrax while he and his household slept.

Abrax had not wanted the nature of the missing items to become public knowledge. He knew people who knew people who knew Imbry. Overtures were made, inquiries carried out, the items located and a finder's fee agreed upon. Neither Tung nor Imbry had thought it wise to attend the transfer of the goods to Abrax's agent, in case the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny had somehow caught a whisper of the doings. They sent a young man experienced in such assignments who did not mind having all of his memories — except for the time, place, and terms of the handover — temporarily misplaced. Their restoration was never complete, and always brought on headaches and double vision, but the fellow considered himself adequately paid.

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The operation was carried out with smooth precision on a busy corner in the ancient City of Olkney, capital of the incomparably more ancient world of Old Earth. But Welliver Tung did not keep her appointment the next day at Bolly's Snug, a tavern where Imbry often liked to conduct business; its back reaches were a warren of private rooms, some with ingenious exits known only to those who paid the owner, Bashur Bolly, handsomely for that knowledge.

Imbry waited until it was clear that Tung was not coming, then returned to his operations center — a concealed room in a nondescript house in a quiet corner of Olkney — to consult his information retrieval matrix. He soon ascertained that Tung had not been taken up by the scroots overnight, nor had she been fished out of Mornedy Sound with heavy objects fastened to her person — an occasional occupational hazard of her profession.

Imbry placed the tips of his plump fingers together and rested his several chins upon them. He thought through the situation. Tung knew him well enough to understand the danger inherent in pulling him when he expected a push, as the expression went. If she was withholding the fat man's commission it was because she needed the funds. If she needed the funds to pay a debt to someone whose collection methods might be even more appalling than Luff Imbry's, he would have heard of it. Therefore, she required the five thousand hepts to take advantage of some opportunity to earn even more, out of which she would seek to mollify Imbry with a bonus.

He returned to his research matrix and made inquiries that spun off from Welliver Tung's several fictitious identities, which he knew about though she did not know that he knew. Data flowed his way and he soon snapped up a telling mote: under the name Harch Belanye, Tung had that morning placed a deposit on a derelict house in Ombron Square, in a district that had once been fashionable but had now fallen into the disrepute that hangs upon desperate poverty.

He conducted more research, this time centered on the property, and acquired further facts. After careful thought, he decided to equip himself with a needler, a police-issue shocker and an elision suit. The garment was made of a material that bent light around its wearer, making him unnoticeable except to the well-trained eye. He retrieved the items from

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a concealed closet that was well stocked with the tools of his illicit trade, many of them designed by Imbry himself.

Outside, he summoned a public aircar and had it drop him beside an alley two streets from Ombron Square. There he slipped into the elision suit, positioned his weapons for easy deployment, and set off to find Welliver Tung. His unseen passage along the debris-strewn streets excited no comment from the few pedestrians he slipped past.

The house that Tung had bought dated from the umpteenth revival of an ornate style of architecture that Imbry considered both finicky and overdone. Its defenses were also standard and he rapidly tickled his way through them, entering the rear of the place on the ground floor. The cleaning systems had cycled down to minimal, and dust hung in the air, along with a faintly sweet mustiness that Imbry recognized as the scent of death, attenuated by the passing of several years.

The odor corroborated what Imbry had gathered from his researches: the former owner of the property, Tib denAarrafol, had been a recluse with few associates and no family. He had not been seen in public for more than a decade, and had most likely died a solitary death here at home, his corpse drying and moldering inconspicuously while the house puttered on about him. At some point, tollsters from the Archonate's fiduciary division had affixed a notice to the door stipulating that unless unpaid taxes were made good, the place would be auctioned. Tib denAarrafol being unable to meet his obligations, the property had gone to the sole bidder: Welliver Tung.

Imbry listened and deduced that the new owner was engaged in moving furniture in one of the front rooms. With his shocker in one hand and the needler in the other, he made his way toward the scraping and bumping. At the end of a dimly lit hall he peered through a doorway and spied his debtor shoving chairs and side tables across the uncarpeted floor, leaving a blank space before a sideboard that stood against the far wall. On its recently dusted surface rested what looked to be a dull black stone the size of Imbry's head, set in an armature of tarnished silver.

The fat man turned his gaze to each corner of the room, determining that Welliver Tung was alone. Then he stepped into the doorway, aimed both weapons and said, "You owe me."

Tung neither squeaked nor jumped. Imbry admired the professionalism that caused her to freeze, then turn oh so slowly toward the door,

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showing her hands empty and well clear of her body. He knew that all she was seeing was a slight shimmer behind a needler and shocker suspended in the air and directed her way. But his voice would have been unmistakable.

"I knew you would show up eventually," she said. "I was hoping to have enough time to ready this for you."

"In situations like this I have found it useful to appear unexpectedly," he said.

"I fully intended to pay you."

"Of course you did. Now explain to me, and be brief, why you haven't, and while you do so I will weigh the penalty."

She had prepared her story. She had been looking for out-of-the-way premises in which to store various items over the short to medium terms and had canvassed abandoned properties in this district. The denAarrafol house had seemed promising, so she had entered and inspected it, finding the former owner upstairs in bed, where he had quietly expired some years previously.

His faint presence did not disturb Tung, who had then gone through the house carefully, in case there might be objects of value pining away for want of ownership. She had found two secret compartments, one of which contained a number of odd items, including an ancient grimoire whose author assumed that magical spells could be efficacious.

"It seems that denAarrafol dabbled in thaumaturgy," she said. "He was working on a book of his own when he died. He believed that magic and rationalism alternated over the aeons in a great cycle and that we are approaching a cusp at which the Wheel turns anew and spells and cantrips become operative, while physics and chemistry become unreliable."

"I have heard of the theory," Imbry said. "It can be a useful construct when separating the gullible from their assets."

"It turns out there is something to it," Tung said.

"Oh?"

"Along with the spell book and various paraphernalia, I found that," Tung said, indicating the stone on the sideboard.

"And that is?" Imbry said, stepping into the room for a closer inspection of the black thing, though he kept an eye on Welliver Tung.

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"In denAarrafol's book, it was referred to as a 'salience indicator,'" Tung said. "It reveals the purpose of a life."

"Of life in general?"

"No, of a specific life — yours, mine, anyone's."

Imbry peered more closely at the stone. It seemed to be a mere lump of black stuff, dull and unreflective. "And how is this determined?"

"It is difficult to...." Tung broke off. "You're going to think that I am trying to slip a flat one under you."

"You would not want me to think that," Imbry said. He assessed the unconscious messages that came from her face and posture, as well as the tiny beads of perspiration that appeared on her upper lip. "I believe you are about to offer me what you, at least, believe to be the truth."

He saw honest relief wash over her. "I'm waiting," he said.

"DenAaarafol's notes say it is a portion of the consciousness — not an organ like the brain but the 'condition of being aware' was how he put it — of an entity that inhabits another continuum," she said. "This entity comprehends the interlinkages of all life in our continuum. It knows the why of every creature's existence."

"Some sort of god?" Imbry asked.

"No," she said, "for it can do nothing with the information. DenAarrafol likened it to a book on a shelf, though the kind of intelligence that would open such a book and read what is written in it was beyond his comprehension. This lump represents but a single 'page,' a page that nonetheless contains the meaning of every life on Old Earth, and perhaps even all the lives of the trillion inhabitants of the Ten Thousand Worlds."

Several large questions came to mind, but Imbry put them aside for later consideration and chose instead to ask a small and simple one. "Why did you buy the house if all you wanted was the 'salience indicator?'"

"It won't move," she said. She spread her hands in a gesture of bafflement. "Again, I don't understand it, but it seems that the object is not really 'here.' Instead, an 'impression' of it is reflected into our universe, but a reflection from its continuum manifests itself as a dense and lightless object in ours, though it remains 'connected' in some manner. In short, it would be easier to move the Devenish Range to the other side of the planet than to budge that thing a hairbreadth."

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Imbry moved on to another question. "How does it work?" Then he quickly added one more. "And what does it actually do?"

The operation was uncomplicated: touch the black lump with the written name or the image of any person, or even an item that had often been in close proximity to the subject. The effect was also simple, Tung said, and immediate: the meaning of that person's existence appeared in the mind of he who had initiated the operation.

Imbry digested the information. "Then if I write my name on a piece of paper and bring it into contact with the object, it will reveal to me the meaning of my existence?"

"No," said Tung. "It will reveal to you the meaning of anyone else's existence except your own. The thaumaturge found that seeking to know his own salience brought on a blinding headache. He conjectured that persevering would create a feedback resonance that would damage his brain."

"Damage how?"

"Boiling followed by melting, was how he put it."

"You have, of course, tested denAarrafol's surmises?"

"I have. They seem to be correct."

"And thus your plan was to reopen the house as a venue for revealing the meaning of their lives to those who would offer a reasonable fee?" Imbry said.

"At first," Tung said. "Once it became the vogue to discover one's salience, I intended to charge a quite unreasonable fee, out of which I would repay what I owe you, plus a substantial bonus."

"A good plan," Imbry said. "It requires only one small emendation."

Tung stiffened. "I think it is perfect as it is."

"You lack the perspective," said Imbry, "of someone with two weapons."

Her shoulders slumped. "I have made a considerable outlay from my limited resources to acquire this house."

"From *my* resources," Imbry corrected her. "Thus it shall be a joint venture. I shall take eighty parts; you will have twenty. But, out of gratitude, I shall write off the five thousand hepts you owe me."

"This seems unjust."

"It seemed no less unjust to me that my five thousand were put to

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work without my consent. I know several less indulgent persons who, in the same circumstances, would now be arranging to remove two corpses from these premises."

Tung grumbled but acquiesced. "It was ever thus," she said. "The big teeth take the big bites."

IMBRY INVESTED more of his funds in the enterprise, thoroughly refurbishing the house so that its appearance would not startle or dismay persons of advanced social rank. When all was in readiness, he employed his research matrix to identify a dozen persons, each of whom met two criteria: they would be intrigued by the concept, and they would spread the word among the refined of Olkney in a manner that would bring those whose lives were governed by fashion to his door, thirsting for knowledge.

He summoned the dozen to a soiree and demonstrated the salience indicator. As he had expected, the meaning of each of the initial batch's lives was confined to the subject's having an effect on style. To Imbry these seemed poor excuses for existence, but the opinion makers were delighted to have their tawdry and ephemeral goals demonstrated.

Word soon spread. Imbry engaged a pair of large, silent attendants and dressed them in suitably impressive costumes. The mutes collected extravagant fees and conducted aristocrats and magnates into the presence. The fat man had determined that he would earn more if he restricted his operation to no more than one hour, every other night. The compressed supply of enlightenment speedily drove up demand, returning his investment many times over in the first week, then lifting his profit into reaches that were enough to make even Imbry blink in surprise.

He fastidiously meted out to Welliver Tung every grimlet that she was owed as a twenty-percent participant in the venture. Her take must have greatly exceeded whatever she might have expected to have received before his entry into the proceedings, Imbry knew. Yet she showed a sour attitude, even as he handed her a valise bulging with pelf.

To cheer her, he said, "Let me put your name to the salience indicator. Free of charge. It will be as if you were a duke or count-margrave."

She signaled a negative. "I decided from the beginning that that was not a knowledge I cared to encompass."

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"Why?" Imbry said, in an airy tone. "Did you not wish to discover that the point of your existence was to assist me in my goals?"

Tung's eyes became narrow, glinting with a hard light, but she said nothing. She departed and Imbry prepared to receive the next intake of well-heeled punters.

In time, however, a bleakness threatened to descend upon the fat man. He tired of the sameness of the life-meanings he dispensed to the highest echelons of Old Earth society. Too often, he was required to extemporize an answer because he soon discovered that telling the unvarnished truth, as it appeared in his mind when he touched a name or image to the lump, could never satisfy the client.

A young lordling did not welcome being told, "The meaning of your life is that you will father a child who will in turn father a child who will, seventy-three years from now, bump into a man on a street corner, causing that man to miss an appointment."

They preferred to hear, "Because of a remark that you drop into a casual conversation, a brilliant new epoch in appliqued fabric design will sweep the finest salons of Olkney. Unfortunately, it will not become the overpowering vogue until months after your demise, but your genius will be recognized as its inciting spark, and the ages will remember you and bless your name."

He was not surprised that the clients found these patent fantasies much more palatable than the blunt truth. But it continued to wear on Imbry that so many of the lives he touched to the salience indicator were revealed to be of almost no consequence at all. So many people were little more than placeholders, keeping a seat warm until someone of true moment should come along and briefly occupy it.

"But, perhaps," he told himself, "I achieve these tiresome, tawdry results because I am limiting the revelations to the idle rich, who live notoriously unproductive lives. If I sought out saints and savants, I would likely see cheerier visions."

Then he reminded himself that the quality of the visions was not the purpose of the endeavor. The goal was to make wealth flow thickly toward Luff Imbry, and the returns were more than handsome. Imbry used them to indulge his increasingly elevated tastes and fancies — especially those

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that arose from his gustatory appetites. He devoured dishes that were legendary, including some that could not be created more than once in a century, so rare were the ingredients. From these occasions he derived a grim satisfaction, reveling in the textures and aromas, while saying to himself, *If not I, then who*?

Sometimes, as he lay in his bed, the savors of the evening's feast lingering on his palate, his mind would drift toward the inevitable question. Always, he pushed temptation away. What would it serve to know the salience of Luff Imbry? If he learned the context of his existence, for good or ill (and he did not expect much good), could he summon the strength to go on doing as he did?

He recalled one client whose purpose in life was discharged even before he reached full maturity: by waving a wad of currency under the percepts of an autocab, the young buck had snatched it from a poor young woman already late for an interview with an editor, thus smothering a prospective great literary career in its infancy. The rest of the client's life was an empty afterthought. The young woman's fate was unrecorded.

Suppose Imbry discovered that the point of his being had been unwittingly achieved in his youth. Could he go on filling and voiding his innards, year upon year, knowing that his moment had already come and gone, unmarked, unheeded?

Or suppose, for all his mastery of the arts of peculation and hornswogglery, he turned out to be but a minor player in someone else's grander game — the user used — would his pride withstand the illumination? These were questions best left unanswered.

It would be different if he had someone with whom he could share the burden of such knowledge, but Imbry accepted that solitariness was a necessary condition of the profession he had freely chosen. It would not do to make dear friends only to see them become liabilities that must be disposed of.

Then one evening, he came to the denAarrafol house to discover that Welliver Tung had arrived before him. She was waiting in the now opulent room where the salience indicator sat, wearing an expression that Imbry could only characterize as a mean-hearted sulk.

He sent one of the attendants to retrieve her portion of the week's

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proceeds: the big man returned lugging two filled satchels, but Tung accepted them with ill grace.

"What is wrong?" Imbry said.

"This should have been all mine."

Imbry formed his plump lips into an arrangement that expressed a sad knowledge. "Be thankful that it wasn't. I have discovered that there is a price to be paid for what that thing reveals, and paid even by one who merely transmits the revelation."

Tung made a wordless sound that indicated she neither shared nor valued his opinion.

Imbry said, "Not everything that passes through pipes is clean and wholesome, thus it is fortunate for many pipes that they are not burdened with awareness." He looked inward for a moment, then said, "I have come to believe that denAarrafol's death may have been self-inflicted."

Tung made the same sound as before, only with more emphasis. "Don't try to wax me," she said. "I don't hold a polish."

Imbry was capable of expressing much with a shrug. He now offered her a particularly eloquent one. Her jawline grew sharp, and she reached into a pocket and withdrew a slip of paper.

"While I was waiting I wrote down your name," she said. Before he could move she leaned back and touched the paper to the dull blackness. Imbry saw the effect of the contact appear in her face: surprise followed by comprehension succeeded by feline satisfaction.

"Do you want to know the point of your existence?" she said. "Such as it is?"

"From your face, I believe I already do," he said.

"Why settle for faith when certainty is at hand?"

There was a needler in his pocket. He thought about using it, then decided that he would not. He stood quietly while she told him the meaning of his life. It did not take long.

When she was finished he remained standing, contemplating the images she had conjured into his mind: his future self, the persons into whose story he would be drawn, the small role he would fulfill — not as the hero, not even as the pivot of fate, but as merely a supporting player in another's drama, there to speak his lines and do his business, then fade away.

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After a moment, his eyes came back from the vision to encompass Welliver Tung, saw her flinch at the hardness in his face. Then he smiled a small smile, gave her another shrug and said, "The house is yours. I advise you to close it up and forget its secrets."

He turned and left, took an air car to his favorite club and treated himself to a sumptuous dinner. He paid close attention to every facet of the experience, lingered over each dish, cherished every morsel. Sated, he retired to one of the transients' rooms and slept better than he had for some weeks.

Not long after, business took him away — an extended tour of several worlds up and down The Spray, where people could be persuaded to pay remarkable sums for goods that were bedecked with just the right glamor of legend blended with trumpery. He took pleasure in his work, not because it had intrinsic meaning but because it was well wrought.

"It is good to have substance to one's existence," he told his dark reflection in the first class observation port of a space liner, as the stars streamed by. "But if fate denies one substance, one can yet do a lot with style."

When he returned to Olkney he learned that Welliver Tung had leapt from the upper story of the Brelle Tower. He heard nothing of what had happened to the salience indicator, and did not inquire.

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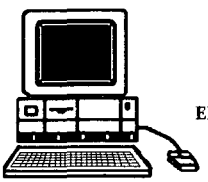

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Ysabeau Wilce introduced us to Hardhands, Tiny Doom, and their fabulously baroque environs with "Metal More Attractive" in our Feb. 2004 issue. It has taken more than two years for us to get a new story from her, but that's only because she has been working on novels for young readers; the first book, entitled Flora Segunda, or the Magickal Mishaps of a Girl of Spirit, Her Glass-Gazing Sidekick, Two Ominous Butlers (One Blue), a House with Eleven Thousand Rooms and a Red Dog, *is due out in the Fall. These days, Ms. Wilce lives in Chicago.*

The Lineaments of Gratified Desire

By Ysabeau S. Wilce

"Abstinence sows sand all over
The ruddy limbs & flowing hair
But Desire Gratified
Plants fruit of life & beauty there."
—William Blake

I: Stage Fright

Here is Hardhands up on the stage, and he's cheery cherry, sparking fire, he's as fast as a fox-trotter, stepping high. Sweaty blood dribbles his brow, bloody sweat stipples his torso, and behind him the Vortex buzzsaw whines, its whirling outer edge black enough to cut glass. The razor in his hand flashes like a heliograph as he motions the final Gesture of the Invocation. The Eye of the Vortex flutters, but its perimeter remains firmly within the structure of Hardhands' Will and does not expand. He ululates a Command, and the Eye begins to open, like a pupil dilating in sunlight, and from its vivid yellowness comes a glimpse of scales and horns, struggling not to be born.

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Someone tugs at Hardhands' foot. His concentration wavers. Someone yanks on the hem of his kilt. His concentration wiggles, and the Vortex wobbles slightly like a run-down top. Someone tugs on his foot, and his concentration collapses completely, and so does the Vortex, sucking into itself like water down a drain. There goes the Working for which Hardhands has been preparing for the last two weeks, and there goes the Tygers of Wrath's new drummer, and there goes their boot-kicking show.

Hardhands throws off the grasp with a hard shake, and looking down, prepares to smite. His lover is shouting upward at him, words that Hardhands can hardly hear, words he hopes he can hardly hear, words he surely did not hear a-right. The interior of the club is toweringly loud, noisy enough to make the ears bleed, but suddenly the thump of his heart, already driven hard by the strength of his magickal invocation, is louder.

Relais, pale as paper, repeats the shout. This time there is no mistaking what he says, much as Hardhands would like to mistake it, much as he would like to hear something else, something sweet and charming, something like: you are the prettiest thing ever born, or the Goddess grants wishes in your name, or they are killing themselves in the streets because the show is sold right out. Alas, Relais is shouting nothing quite so sweet.

"What do you mean, you cannot find Tiny Doom?" Hardhands shouts back. He looks wildly around the congested club, but it's dark and there are so many of them, and most of them have huge big hair and huger bigger boots. A tiny purple girl-child and her stuffy pink pig have no hope in this throng; they'd be trampled underfoot in a second. That is exactly what Hardhands had told the Pontifexa earlier that day; no babysitter, he, other business, other pleasures, no time to take care of small children, not on this night of all nights: The Tygers of Wrath's biggest show of the year. Find someone else.

Well, talkers are no good doers, they say, and talking had done no good, all the yapping growling barking howling in the world had not changed the Pontifexa's mind: it's Paimon's night off, darling, and she'll be safe with you, Banastre, I can trust my heir with no one else, my sweet boy, do your teeny grandmamma this small favor and how happy I shall be, and here, kiss-kiss, I must run, I'm late, have a wonderful evening, good luck with the show, don't set yourself on fire, cheerie-bye my darling.

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And now see:

Hardhands roars: "I told you to keep an eye on her, Relais!"

He had too, he couldn't exactly watch over Tiny Doom (so called because she is the first in stature and the second in fate), while he was invoking the drummer, and with no drummer, there's no show (no show damn it!) and anyway if he's learned anything as the grandson of the Pontifexa of Califa, it's how to delegate.

Relais shouts back garbled defense. His eyes are whirling pie-plates. He doesn't mention that he stopped at the bar on his way to break the news and that there he downed four Choronzon Delights (hold the delight, double the Choronzon) before screwing up the courage to face his lover's ire. He doesn't mention that he can't exactly remember the last time he saw Little Tiny Doom except that he thinks it might have been about the time when she said that she had to visit El Casa de Peepee (oh cute) and he'd taken her as far as the door to the loo, where she had insisted haughtily she could do alone, and then he'd been standing outside, and gotten distracted by Arsinoë Fyrdraaca, who'd sauntered by, wrapped around the most gorgeous angel with rippling red wings, and then they'd gone to get a drink, and then another drink, and then when Relais remembered that Tiny Doom and Pig were still in the potty and pushed his way back through the crush, Tiny Doom and Pig were not still in the potty anymore.

And now, here:

Up until this very second, Hardhands has been feeling dandy as candy about this night: his invocation has been powerful and sublime, the blood in his veins replaced by pure unadulterated Magickal Current, hot and heavy. Up until this very second, if he clapped his hands together, sparks would fly. If he sang a note, the roof would fall. If he tossed his hair, fans would implode. Just from the breeze of the Vortex through his skin, he had known this was going to be a charm of a show, the very pinnacle of bombast and bluster. The crowded club still hums with coldfire charge, the air still sparks, cracking with glints of magick: yowza. But now all that rich bubbly magick is curdling in his veins, his drummer has slid back to the Abyss, and he could beat someone with a stick. Thanks to an idiot boyfriend and a bothersome five-year-old, his evening has just tanked.

Hardhands' perch is lofty. Despite the roiling smoke (cigarillo, incense,

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and oil), he can look out over the big big hair, and see the club is as packed as a cigar box with hipsters eager to see the show. From the stage Hardhands can see a lot, his vision sharpened by the magick he's been mainlining, and he sees: hipsters, b-boys, gothicks, blackcoats, tulips, boozers, and other such nighttime luminaries. He does not see a small child or a pink pig or even the tattered remnants of a small child and a pink pig or even, well, he doesn't see them period.

Hardhands sucks in a deep breath and uses what is left of the Invocation still working through his veins to shout: "✖⓪!"

The syllable is vigorous and combustible, flowering in the footlights like a bruise. The audience erupts into a hollering hooting howl. They think the show is about to start. They are ready and geared. Behind Hardhands, the band also mistakes his intention, and despite the lack of drummer, kicks in with the triumphant blare of a horn, the delirious bounce of the hurdy-gurdy.

"✖⑥!" This time the shout sparks bright red, a flash of coldfire that brings tears to the eyes of the onlookers. Hardhands raises an authoritative hand toward the band, crashing them into silence. The crowd follows suit and the ensuing quiet is almost as ear-shattering.

"✖⓪." This time his words provide no sparkage, and he knows that his Will is fading under his panic. The club is dark. It is full of large people. Outside it is darker still and the streets of South of the Slot are wet and full of dangers. No place for a Tiny Doom and her Pig, oh so edible, to be wandering around, alone. Outside it's the worst night of the year to be wandering alone anywhere in the City, particularly if you are short, stout, and toothsome.

"✖⓪!" This time Hardhands' voice, the voice which has launched a thousand stars, which has impregnated young girls with monsters and kept young men at their wanking until their wrists ache, is scorched and rather squeaky:

"Has anyone seen my wife?"

II: Historical Notes

Here is a bit of background. No ordinary night, tonight, not at all. It's Pirates' Parade and the City of Califa is afire — in some places actually

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blazing. No fear, tho', bucket brigades are out in force, for the Pontifexa does not wish to lose her capital to revelry. Wetness is stationed around the things that the Pontifexa most particularly requires not to burn: her shrines, Bilskinir House, Arden's Cake-O-Rama, the Califa National Bank. Still, even with these bucket brigades acting as damper, there's fun enough for everyone. The City celebrates many holidays, but surely Pirates' Parade ranks as Biggest and Best.

But why pirates and how a parade? Historians (oh fabulous professional liars) say that it happened thusly: Back in the day, no chain sealed off the Bay of Califa from seafaring foes, and the Califa Gate sprang wide as an opera singer's mouth, a state of affairs good for trade and bad for security. Chain was not all the small city lacked: no guard, no organized militia, no bloodthirsty Scorcher Regiment to stand against havoc, and no Navy. The City was fledgling and disorganized, hardly more than a village, plump for the picking.

One fine day, Pirates took advantage of Califa's tenderness, sailed right through her Gate, and docked at the Embarcadero, as scurvy as you please. From door to door they went, demanding tribute or promising wrath, and when they were loaded down with booty they went well satisfied back to their ships to sail away.

But they didn't get far. While the pirates were shaking down the householders, a posse of quiet citizens crept down to the docks and sabotaged the poorly guarded pirate ships. The pirates arrived back at the docks to discover their escape boats sinking, and then suddenly the docks themselves were on fire and their way off the docks was blocked, and then they were on fire too, and that was it.

Perhaps Califa had no Army, no Navy, no Militia, but she did have citizens with grit and cleverness, and grit and cleverness trump greed and guns every time. Such a clever victory over a pernicious greedy foe is worth celebrating, and maybe even repeating, in a fun sort of way, and thus was born a roistering day of remembrance when revelers dressed as pirates gallivant door to door demanding candy booty, and thus Little Tiny Doom has muscled in on Hardhands' evening. With Grandmamma promised to attend a whist party, and Butler Paimon's night off, who else would take Tiny Doom (and the resplendently costumed Pig) on candy shakedown? Who but our hero, as soon as his

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show is over and his head back down to Earth, lucky boy?

Well.

The Blue Duck and its hot dank club-y-ness may be the place to be when you are tall and trendy and your hearing is already shot, but for a short kidlet, big hair and loud noises bore, and the cigarillo smoke scratches: Tiny Doom has waited for Pirates' Parade for weeks, dreaming of pink popcorn and sugar squidies, chocolate manikins and jacksnaps, praline pumpkin seeds and ginger bombs: a sackful of sugar guaranteed to keep her sick and speedy for at least a week. She can wait no longer.

Shortness has its advantage; trendy people look up their noses, not down. The potty is filthy and the floor yucky wet; Tiny Doom and Pig slither out the door, right by Relais, so engaged in his conversation with a woman with a boat in her hair that he doesn't even notice the scram. Around elbows, by tall boots, dodging lit cigarettes and drippy drinks held low and cool-like, Tiny Doom and Pig achieve open air without incident and then, sack in hand, set out for the Big Shakedown.

"*Rancy Dancy is no good,*" she sings as she goes, swinging Pig, who is of course, too lazy to walk, "*Chop him up for firewood... When he's dead, boil his head and bake it into gingerbread...*"

She jumps over a man lying on the pavement, and then into the reddish pool beyond. The water makes a satisfying *splash* and tho' her hem gets wet, she is sure to hold Pig up high so that he remains dry. He's just getting over a bad cold and has to care for his health, silly Pig, he is delicate, and up past his bedtime, besides. Well, it is only once a year.

Down the slick street, Tiny Doom galumphs, Pig swinging along with her. There are shadows ahead of her and shadows behind, but after the shadows of Bilskinir House (which can sometimes be *grabby*) these shadows: so what? There's another puddle ahead, this one dark and still. She pauses before it, and some interior alarum indicates that it would be best to jump over, rather than in. The puddle is wide, spreading across the street like a strange black stain. As she gears up for the leap, a faint rippling begins to mar the mirror-like surface.

"Wah! Wah!" Tiny Doom is short, but she has lift. Holding her skirt in one hand, and with a firm grip upon Pig, she hurtles herself upward and over, like a tiny tea cosy levering aloft. As she springs, something wavery and white snaps out of the stillness, cracking toward her like a whip. She

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lands on the other side and keeps scooting. Six straggly fingers, like pallid parsnips, waggle angrily at her, but she's well beyond their grip.

"*Tell her, smell her! Kick her down the cellar,*" Tiny Doom taunts, flapping Pig's ears derisively. The scraggly arm falls back, and then another emerges from the water, hoisting up on its elbows, pulling a slow rising bulk behind it: a knobby head, with knobby nose and knobby forehead and a slowly opening mouth that shows razor sharp gums and a pointy black tongue, unrolling like a hose. The tongue has length where the arms did not, and it looks gooey and sticky, just like the salt licorice Grandmamma loves so much. Tiny Doom cares not for salt licorice one bit and neither does Pig, so it seems prudent to punt, and they do, as fast as her chubby legs can carry them, farther down the slickery dark street.

III: Irritating Children

Here is Hardhands in the alley behind the club, taking a deep breath of brackish air, which chills but does not calm. Inside, he has left an angry mob, who've had their hopes dashed rather than their ears blown. The Infernal Engines of Desire (opening act) has come back on stage and is trying valiantly to suck up the slack, but the audience is not particularly pacified. The Blue Duck will be lucky if it doesn't burn. However, that's not our hero's problem; he's got larger fish frying.

He sniffs the air, smelling: the distant salt spray of the ocean; drifting smoke from some bonfire; cheap perfume; his own sweat; horse manure. He closes his eyes and drifts deeper, beyond smell, beyond scent, down down down into a wavery darkness that is threaded with filaments of light which are not really light, but which he knows no other way to describe. The darkness down here is not really darkness either, it's the Magickal Current as his mind can envision it, giving form to the formless, putting the indefinable into definite terms. The Current bears upon its flow a tendril of something familiar, what he qualifies, for lack of a better word, as a taste of obdurate obstinacy and pink plush, fading quickly but unmistakable.

The Current is high tonight, very high. In consequence, the Aeyther is humming, the Aeyther is abuzz; the line between In and Out has narrowed to a width no larger than a hair, and it's an easy step across —

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but the jump can go either way. Oh this would have been the very big whoo for the gig tonight; musickal magick of the highest order, but it sucks for lost childer out on the streets. South of the Slot is bad enough when the Current is low: a sewer of footpads, dollymops, blisters, mashers, cornhoes, and others is not to be found elsewhere so deep in the City even on an ebb-tide day. Tonight, combine typical holiday mayhem with the rising magickal flood and Goddess knows what will be out, hungry and yummy for some sweet tender kidlet chow. And not even regular run-of-the-mill niblet, but prime grade A best grade royalty. The Pontifexa's heir, it doesn't get more yummy than that — a vampyre could dare sunlight with that bubbly blood zipping through his veins, a ghoul could pass for living after gnawing on that sweet flesh. It makes Hardhands' manly parts shrivel to think upon the explanation to Grandmamma of Tiny Doom's loss and the blame sure to follow.

Hardhands opens his eyes, it's hardly worth wasting the effort of going deep when everything is so close to the surface tonight. Behind him, the iron door flips open and Relais flings outward, borne aloft on a giant wave of disapproving noise. The door snaps shut, cutting the sound in a brief echo that quickly dies in the coffin narrow alleyway.

"Did you find her?" Relais asks, holding his fashionable cuffs so they don't trail on the mucky cobblestones. Inside his brain is bouncing with visions of the Pontifexa's reaction if they return home minus Cyrenacia. Actually, what she is going to say is the least of his worries; it is what she might do that really has Relais gagging. He likes his lungs exactly where they are: inside his body, not flapping around outside.

Hardhands turns a white-hot look upon his lover and says: "If she gets eaten, Relais, I will eat you."

Relais's father always advised saving for a rainy day and though the sky above is mostly clear, Relais is feeling damp. He will check his bankbook when they get home, and reconsider Sweetie Fyrdraaca's proposition. He's been Hardhands' leman for more than a year now: blood sacrifices, coldfire-singed clothing, throat-tearing invocations, cornmeal gritty sheets, murder. He's had enough. He makes no reply to the threat.

Hardhands demands, not very politely: "Give me my frockcoat."

Said coat, white as snow, richly embroidered in white peonies and with cuffs the size of tablecloths, well, Relais had been given that to guard

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too, and he now has a vague memory of hanging it over the stall door in the pisser, where hopefully it still dangles, but probably not.

"I'll get it — " Relais fades backward, into the club, and Hardhands lets him go.

For now.

For now, Hardhands takes off his enormous hat, which had remained perched upon his gorgeous head during his invocation via a jeweled spike of a hairpin, and speaks a word into its upturned bowl. A green light pools up, spilling over the hat's capacious brim, staining his hand and the sleeve below with drippy magick. Another commanding word, and the light surges upward and ejects a splashy elemental, fish-tail flapping.

"Eh, boss — I thought you said I had the night off," Alfonso complains. There's lip rouge smeared on his fins and a clutch of cards in his hand. "It's Pirates' Parade."

"I changed my mind. That wretched child has given me the slip and I want you to track her."

Alfonso grimaces. Ever since Little Tiny Doom trapped him in a bowl of water and fed him fishy flakes for two days, he's avoided her like fluke-rot.

"Why worry your good luck, boss — "

Hardhands does not have to twist. He only has to look like he is going to twist. Alfonso zips forward, flippers flapping, and Hardhands, after draining his chapeau of Current and slamming it back upon his grape, follows.

IV: Who's There?

Here is The Roaring Gimlet, sitting pretty in her cozy little kitchen, toes toasting on the grate, toast toasting on the tongs, drinking hot ginger beer, feeling happily serene. She's had a fun-dandy evening. Citizens who normally sleep behind chains and steel bolts, dogs a-prowl and guns under their beds, who maybe wouldn't open their doors after dark if their own mothers were lying bleeding on the threshold, these people fling their doors widely and with gay abandon to the threatening cry of "Give us the Candy or we'll give you the Rush."

Any other night, at this time, she'd still be out in the streets, looking

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for drunken greenhorns to roll. But tonight, all gates were a-jar and the streets a high tide of drunken louts. Out by nine and back by eleven, with a sack almost too heavy to haul, a goodly load of sugar, and a yummy fun-toy, too. Now she's enjoying her happy afterglow from a night well-done. The noises from the cellar have finally stopped, she's finished the cross-word in *The Alta Califa*, and as soon as the kettle blows, she'll fill her hot water bottle and aloft to her snuggly bed, there to dwell the rest of the night away in kip.

Ah, Pirates' Parade, best night of the year.

While she's waiting for the water to bubble, she's cleaning the tool from whence comes her name: the bore is clotted with icky stuff and the Gimlet likes her signature clean and sharply shiny. Clean hands, clean house, clean heart, the Gimlet's daddy always said. Above the fireplace, Daddy's flat representation stares down at his progeny, the self-same gimlet clenched in his hand. The Roaring Gimlet is the heir to a fine family tradition and she does love her job.

What's that a-jingling? She glances at the clock swinging over the stove. It's almost midnight. Too late for visitors, and anyway, everyone knows the Roaring Gimlet's home is her castle. Family stays in, people stay out, so Daddy Gimlet always said. Would someone? No, they wouldn't. Not even tonight, they would not.

Jingle jingle.

The cat looks up from her perch on the fender, perturbed.

Heels down, the Gimlet stands aloft, and tucks her shirt back into her skirts, ties her dressing gown tight, bounds up the ladder-like kitchen stairs to the front door. The peephole shows a dimly lit circle of empty cobblestones. Damn it all to leave the fire for nothing. As the Gimlet turns away, the bell dances again, jangling her into a surprised jerk.

The Roaring Gimlet opens the door, slipping the chain, and is greeted with a squirt of flour right in the kisser, and a shrieky command:

"Give us the Candy or we'll give you the Rush!"

The Gimlet coughs away the flour, choler rising, and beholds before her, knee-high, a huge black feathered hat. Under the hat is a pouty pink face, and under the pouty pink face, a fluffy farthingale that resembles in both color and points an artichoke, and under that, purple dance shoes, with crisscrossy ribands. Riding on the hip of this apparition is a large pink

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plushy pig, also wearing purple crisscrossy dance shoes, golden laurel leaves perched over floppy piggy ears.

It's the Pig that the Gimlet recognizes first, not the kid. The kid, whose public appearances have been kept to a minimum (the Pontifexa is wary of too much flattery, and as noted, chary of her heir's worth), could be any kid, but there is only one Pig, all Califa knows that, and the kid must follow the Pig, as day follows night, as sun follows rain, as fortune follows the fool.

"Give us the CANDY or we'll GIVE YOU THE RUSH!" A voice to pierce glass, to cut right through the Gimlet's recoil, all the way down to her achy toes. The straw-shooter moves from *present* to *fire*; while Gimlet was gawking, reloading had occurred, and another volley is imminent. She's about to slam shut the door, she cares not to receive flour or to give out yum, but then, door-jamb held halfway in hand, she stops. An idea, formed from an over-abundance of yellow nasty novellas and an under-abundance of good sense, has leapt full-blown from Nowhere to the Somewhere that is the Roaring Gimlet's calculating brain. So much for sugar, so much for swag: here then is a price above rubies, above diamonds, above chocolate, above, well, Above All. What a pretty price a pretty piece could fetch. On such proceeds the Gimlet could while away her elder days in endless sun and fun-toys.

Before the kid can blow again, the Gimlet grins, in her best granny way, flour feathering about her, and says, "Well, now, chickiedee, well now indeed. I've no desire to be rushed, but you are late and the candy is — "

She recoils, but not in time, from another spurt of flour. When she wipes away the flour, she is careful not to wipe away her welcoming grin. "But I have more here in the kitchen, come in, tiny pirate, out of the cold, and we shall fill your sack full."

"Huh," says the child, already her husband's Doom and about to become the Roaring Gimlet's, as well. "GIVE ME THE CANDY — "

Patience is a virtue that the Roaring Gimlet is well off without. She peers beyond the kid, down the street. There are people about but they are: drunken people, or burning people, or screaming people, or carousing people, or running people. None of them appear to be observant people, and that's perfecto. The Gimlet reaches and grabs.

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"Hey!" says the Kid. The Pig does not protest.

Tiny Doom is stout, and she can dig her heels in, but the Gimlet is stouter and the Gimlet has two hands free, where Tiny Doom has one, and the Pig is too flabby to help. Before Tiny Doom can shoot off her next round of flour, she's yanked and the door is slammed shut behind her, bang!

V. Bad Housekeeping

Here is Hardhands striding down the darkened streets like a colossus, dodging fire, flood, and fighting. He is not upset, oh no indeedy. He's cool and cold and so angry that if he touched tinder it would burst into flames, if he tipped tobacco it would explode cherry red. And there's more than enough ire to go around, which is happy because the list of Hardhands' blame is quite long.

Firstly: the Pontifexa for making him take Cyrenacia with him. What good is it to be her darling grandson when he's constantly on doodie-detail? Being the only male Haðraaða should be good for: power, mystery, free booze, noli me tangere, first and foremost, the biggest slice of cake. Now being the only male Haðraaða is good for: marrying small torments, kissing the Pontifexa's ass, and being bossed into wife-sitting. He almost got Grandmamma once; perhaps the decision should be revisited.

Secondly: Tiny Doom for not standing still. When he gets her, he's going to paddle her, see if he doesn't. She's got it coming, a long time coming and perhaps a hot hinder will make her think twice about, well, think twice about everything. Didn't he do enough for her already? He married her, to keep her in the family, to keep her out of the hands of her nasty daddy, who otherwise would have the prior claim. Ungrateful kidlet. Perhaps she deserves whatever she gets.

Thirdly: Relais for being such an utter jackass that he can't keep track of a four-year-old. Hardhands has recently come across a receipt for an ointment that allows the wearer to walk through walls. For which, this sigil requires three pounds of human tallow. He's got a few walls he wouldn't mind flitting right through and, at last, Relais will be useful.

Fourthly: Paimon. What need has a domicilic denizen for a night off anyway? He's chained to the physical confines of the House Bilskinir by

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a sigil stronger than life. He should be taking care of the Heir to the House Bilskinir, not doing whatever the hell he is doing on his night off which he shouldn't be doing anyway because he shouldn't be having a night off and when Hardhands is in charge, he won't, no sieur.

Fifthly: Pig. Ayah, so, well, Pig is a stuffy pink plush toy, and can hardly be blamed for anything, but what the hell, why not? Climb on up, Pig, there's always room for one more!

And ire over all: his ruined invocation, for which he had been purging starving dancing and flogging for the last two weeks, all in preparation for what would surely be the most stupendous summoning in the history of summoning. It's been a stellar group of dæmons that Hardhands has been able to force from the Aeyther before, but this time he had been going for the highest of the high, the loudest of the loud, and the show would have been sure to go down in the annals of musickoly and his name, already famous, would become gigantic in its shadow. And now....

The streets are full of distraction but neither Hardhands nor Alfonso are distracted. Tiny Doom's footprints pitty-patter before them, glowing in the gloam like little blue flowers, and they follow, avoiding burning brands, dead horses, drunken warblers, slithering servitors, gushing water pipes, and an impromptu cravat party and, because of their glowering concentration, they are avoided by all the aforementioned, in turn. The pretty blue footprints dance, and leap, from here to there, and there to here, over cobblestone and curb, around corpse and copse, by Cobweb's Palace and Pete's Clown Diner, by Ginger's Gin Goint and Guerrero's Helado, and other blind tigers so blind they are nameless also, dives so low that just walking by will get your knickers wet. The pretty prints don't waver, don't dilly-dally, and then suddenly, they turn toward a door, broad and barred, and they stop.

At the door, Hardhands doesn't bother knocking, and neither does Alfonso, but their methods of entry differ. Alfonso zips through the wooden obstruction as though it is neither wooden nor obstructive. Hardhands places palm down on wood, and via a particularly loud Barbarick exhortation, blows the door right off its hinges. His entry is briefly hesitated by the necessity to chase after his chapeau, having blown off also in the breeze of Barbarick, but once it is firmly stabbed back on his handsome head, onward he goes, young Hardhands, hoping very much

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that something else will get in his path, because, he can't deny it: exploding things is Fun.

The interior of the house is dark and dull, not that Hardhands is there to critique the décor. Alfonso has zipped ahead of him, coldfire frothing in his wake. Hardhands follows the bubbly pink vapor down a narrow hallway, past peeling paneling and dusty doorways. He careens down creaky stairs, bending head to avoid braining on low ceiling, and into a horrible little kitchen.

He wrinkles his nose. Our young hero is used to a praeterhuman amount of cleanliness, and here there is neither. At Bilskinir House even the light looks as though it's been washed, dried, and pressed before hung in the air. In contrast, this poky little hole looks like the back end of a back end bar after a particularly festive game of Chew the Ear. Smashed crockery and blue willow china crunches under boot, and the furniture is bonfire ready. A faint glow limns the wreckage, the after-reflection of some mighty big magick. The heavy sour smell of blackberries wrinkles in his nose. Coldfire dribbles from the ceiling, whose plaster cherubs and grapes look charred and withered.

Hardhands pokes at a soggy wad of clothes lying in a heap on the disgusting floor. For one testicle-shriveling moment he thought he saw black velvet amongst the sog; he does, but it's a torn shirt, not a puffy hat.

All magickal acts leave a resonance behind, unless the magician takes great pains to hide: Hardhands knows every archon, hierophant, sorceress, bibliomatic, and avatar in the City, but he doesn't recognize the author of this Working. He catches a drip of coldfire on one long finger and holds it up to his lips: salt-sweet-smoky — oddly familiar but not enough to identify.

"Pigface pogo!" says our hero. He has put his foot down in slide and almost gone face down in a smear of glass and black goo — mashy blackberry jam, the source of the sweet stench. Flailing unheroically, he regains his balance, but in doing so, grabs at the edge of an overturned settle. The settle has settled backward, cockeyed on its back feet, but Hardhands' leverage rocks it forward again, and, hello, here's the Gimlet — well, parts of her anyway. She is stuck to the bench by a flood of dried blood, and the expression on her face is doleful, and a little bit surprised.

"Pogo pigface on a pigpogopiss! Who the hell is that?"

Alfonso yanks the answer from the Aethyr. "The Roaring Gimlet,

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petty roller and barn stamper. You see her picture sometimes in the post office."

"She don't look too roaring to me. What the hell happened to her?"

Alfonso zips closer, while Hardhands holds his sleeve to his sensitive nose. The stench of metallic blood is warring with the sickening sweet smell of the crushed blackberries, and together a pleasuring perfume they do not make.

"Me, I think she was chewed," Alfonso announces after close inspection. "By something hungry and mad."

"What kind of something?"

Alfonso shrugs. "Nobody I know. Sorry, boss."

As long as Doom is not chewed, Hardhands cares naught for the chewyness of others. He uneasily illuminates the fetid shadows with a vivid Barbarick phrase, but thankfully no rag-like wife does he see, tossed aside like a discarded tea towel, nor red wet stuffy Pig-toy, only bloody jam and magick-bespattered walls. He'd never admit it, particularly not to a yappy servitor, but there's a warm feeling of relief in his toes that Cyrenacia and Pig were not snacked upon. But if they were not snacked upon, where the hell are they, oh irritation.

There, in the light of his sigil — sign: two dainty feet stepped in jammy blood, hopped in disgust, and then headed up the back stairs, the shimmer of Bilskinir blue shining faintly through the rusty red. Whatever got the Gimlet did not get his wife and pig, that for sure, that's all he cares about, all he needs to know, and the footprints are fading, too: onward.

At the foot of the stairs, Hardhands poises. A low distant noise drifts out of the floor below, like a bad smell, a rumbly agonized sound that makes his tummy wiggle.

"What is that?"

A wink of Alfonso's tails and top hat and here's his answer: "There's some guy locked in the cellar, and he's — he's in a bad way, and I think he needs our help —"

Hardhands is not interested in guys locked in cellars, nor in their bad ways. The footprints are fading, and the Current is still rising, he can feel it jiggling in his veins. Badness is on the loose — is not the Gimlet proof of that? — and Goddess Califa knows what else, and Tiny Doom is alone.

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VI: Sugar Sweet

Here is Hardhands, hot on the heels of the pretty blue footsteps skipping along through the riotous streets. Hippy-hop, pitty-pat. The trail takes a turning, into a narrow alley and Hardhands turns with it, leaving the sputtering street lamps behind. Before the night was merely dark: now it's darkdarkdark. He flicks a bit of coldfire from his fingertips, blossoming a ball of luminescence that weirdly lights up the crooked little street, broken cobbles and black narrow walls. The coldfire ball bounces onward, and Hardhands follows. The footprints are almost gone: In a few more moments they will be gone; for a lesser magician they would be gone already.

And then, a drift of song:

"Hot corn, hot corn! Buy my hot corn!
Lovely and sweet, Lovely and Warm!"

Out of the shadow comes a buttery smell, hot and wafting, the jingling of bells, friendly and beckoning: a Hot Corn Dolly, out on the prowl. The perfume is delightful and luscious and it reminds Hardhands that dinner was long since off. But Hardhands does not eat corn (while not fasting, he's on an all meat diet, for to clean his system clear of sugar and other poisons), and when the Hot Corn Dolly wiggles her tray at him, her green-ribboned braids dancing, he refuses.

The Corn Dolly is not alone, her sisters stand behind her, and their wide trays, and the echoing wide width of their farthingale skirts, flounced with patchwork, jingling with little bells, form a barricade that Hardhands, the young gentleman, cannot push through. The Corn Dolly skirts are wall-to-wall and their ranks are solid and only rudeness will make a breach.

"I cry your pardon, ladies," he says, in feu de joie, ever courteous, for is not the true mark of a gentleman his kindness toward others, particularly his inferiors? "I care not for corn, and I would pass."

"Buy my hot corn, deliciously sweet,
Gives joy to the sorrowful and strength to the weak."

The Dolly's voice is luscious, ripe with sweetness. In one small hand she holds an ear of corn, dripping with butter, fragrant with the sharp smell of chile and lime, bursting up from its peeling of husk like a flower,

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and this she proffers toward him. Hardhands feels a southerly rumble, and suddenly his mouth is full of anticipatory liquid. Dinner was a long long time ago, and he has always loved hot corn, and how can one little ear of corn hurt him? And anyway, don't he deserve some solace? He fumbles in his pocket, but no divas does he slap; he's the Pontifexa's grandson, and not in the habit of paying for his treats.

The Dolly sees his gesture and smiles. Her lips are glistening golden, as yellow as her silky hair, and her teeth, against the glittering, are like little nuggets of white corn.

"*A kiss for the corn, and corn for a kiss,*
One sweet with flavor, the other with bliss," she sings, and the other dollies join in her harmony, the bells on their square skirts jingling. The hot corn glistens like gold, steamy and savory, dripping with yum. A kiss is a small price to pay to sink his teeth into savory. He's paid more for less and he leans forward, puckering.

The dollies press in, wiggling their oily fingers and humming their oily song, enfolding him in the husk of their skirts, their hands, their licking tongues. His southerly rumble is now a wee bit more southerly, and it's not a rumble, it's an avalanche. The corn rubs against his lips, slickery and sweet, spicy and sour. The chile burns his lips, the butter soothes them, he kisses, and then he licks, and then he bites into a bliss of crunch, the squirt of sweetness cutting the heat and the sour. Never has he tasted anything better, and he bites again, eagerly, butter oozing down his chin, dripping onto his shirt. Eager fingers stroke his skin, he's engorged with the sugar-sweetness, so long denied, and now he can't get enough, each niblet exploding bright heat in his mouth, his tongue, his head, he's drowning in the sweetness of it all.

And like a thunder from the Past, he hears ringing in his head the Pontifexa's admonition, oft-repeated to a whiny child begging for hot corn, spun sugar, spicy taco or fruit cup, sold on the street, in marvelous array but always denied because: *you never know where it's been.* An Admonition drummed into his head with painful frequency, all the other kidlets snacked from the street vendors with reckless abandon, but not the Pontifexa's grandson, whose tum was deemed too delicate for common food and the common bugs it might contain.

Drummed well and hard it would seem, to suddenly recall now, with

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memorable force, better late than never. Hardhands snaps open eyes and sputters kernels. Suddenly he sees true what the Corn Dollies' powerful glamour have disguised under a patina of butter and spice: musky kernels and musky skin. A fuzz of little black flies encircles them. The silky hair, the silky husks are slick with mold. The little white corn teeth grin mottled blue and green, and corn worms spill in a white wiggly waterfall from gaping mouths.

"Arrgg," says our hero, managing to keep the urp down, heroically. He yanks and flutters, pulls and yanks, but the knobby fingers have him firm, stalk to stalk. He heaves, twisting his shoulders, spinning and ducking: now they have his shirt, but he is free.

"✂☜◆✋❖☪!" he bellows, at the top of his magickal lungs. The word explodes from his head with an agonizing aural thud. The Corn Dollies sizzle and shriek, but he doesn't wait around to revel in their popping. Now he's a fleetfooted fancy boy, skeddadling as fast as skirts will allow; to hell with heroics, there's no audience about, just get the hell out. He leaves the shrieking behind him, fast on booted heels, and it's a long heaving pause later, when the smell of burned corn no longer lingers on the air, that he stops to catch breath and bearings. His heart, booming with Barbarick exertion, is starting to slow, but his head, still thundering with a sugary rush, feels as though it might implode right there on his shoulders, dwindle down to a pinprick of pressure, diamond hard. The sugar pounds in his head, beating his brain into a ploughshare of pain, sharp enough to cut a furrow in his skull.

He leans on a scaly wall and sticks a practiced finger down his gullet. Up heaves corn, and bile, and blackened gunk, and more gunk. The yummy sour-lime-butter taste doesn't have quite the same delicious savor coming up as it did going down, nor is his shuddering now quite so delightful. He spits and heaves, and heaves and spits, and when his inside is empty of everything, including probably most of his internal organs, he feels a wee bit better. Not much, but some. His ears are cold. He puts a quivery hand to his head; his hat is gone.

The chapeau is not the only thing to disappear, Tiny Doom's tiny footprints, too, have faded. Oh for a drink to drive the rest of the stale taste of rotting corn from his tonsils. Oh for a super duper purge to scour the rest of the stale speed of sugar from his system. Oh for a bath, and bed, and deep

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sweet sleep. He's had a thin escape, and he knows it: the Corn Sirens could have drained him completely, sucked him dry as a desert sunset, and Punto Finale for the Pontifexa's grandson. Now it's going to take him weeks of purifications, salt-baths, and soda enemas to get back into whack. He's also irked at the loss of his shirt; it was brand-new, he'd only worn it once, and the lace on its sleeves cost him fifty-eight divas in gold. And his hat, bristling with angel feathers, its brim bigger than an apple pancake. He's annoyed at himself, sloppy-sloppy-sloppy.

The coldfire track has sputtered and no amount of Barbarick kindling can spark it alight; it's too late, too gone, too long. Alfonso, too, is absent of summoning and when Hardhands closes his eyes and clenches his fists to his chest, sucks in deep lungs of air, until the Current bubbles in his veins like the most sparkling of red wines, he knows why: the Current has flowed so high now that even the lowliest servitors can ride it without assistance, is strong enough to avoid constraint and ignore demand. He'd better find the kid soon; with the Current this high, only snackers will now be out, and anyone without skill or protection — the snackees — will have long since gone home, or been eaten. Funtime for humans is over, and funtime for Others just begun.

Well, that's fine, Alfonso is just a garnish, not necessary at all. Is not Tiny Doom his own blood? Does not a shared spark run through their veins? He closes eyes again, and stretches arms outward, palms upward and he concentrates every split second of his Will into a huge vaporous awareness that he flings out over Califa like a net. Far far at the back of his throat, almost a tickle, not quite a taste, he finds the smell he is looking for. It's dwindling, and it's distant, but it's there and it's enough. A tiny thread connecting him to her, blood to blood, heat to heat, heartbeat to heartbeat, a tiny threat of things to come when Tiny Doom is not so Tiny. He jerks the thread with infinitesimal delicacy. It's thin, but it holds. It's thin, but it can never completely break.

He follows the thread, gently, gently, down darkened alleys, past shuttered facades, and empty stoops. The streets are slick with smashed fruit, but otherwise empty. He hears the sound of distant noises, hooting, hollering, braying mule, a fire bell, but he is alone. The buildings grow sparser, interspaced with empty lots. They look almost like rows of tombstones, and their broken windows show utterly black. The acrid tang

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of burning sugar tickles his nose, and the sour-salt smell of marshy seawater; he must be getting closer to the bay's soggy edge. Cobblestones give way to splintery corduroy which gives way to moist dirt, and now the sweep of the starry sky above is unimpeded by building facades; he's almost out of the City, he may be out of the City now, he's never been this far on this road and if he hadn't absolute faith in the Haðraaða family bond, he'd be skeptical that Tiny Doom's chubby little legs had made it this far either.

But they have. He knows it.

Hardhands pauses, cocking his head: a tinge suffuses his skin, a gentle breeze that isn't a breeze at all, but the galvanic buzz of the Current. The sky above is now obscured by wafts of spreading fog, and, bourne distantly upon that breeze, a vague tune. Musick.

Onward, on prickly feet, with the metallic taste of magick growing thicker in the back of his throat. The music is building crescendo, it sounds so friendly and fun, promising popcorn and candied apples, fried pies. His feet prickle with these promises and he picks up the pace, buoyed on by the rollicking music, allowing the musick to carry him onward, toward the twinkly lights now beckoning through the heavy mist.

Then the musick is gone and so is the mist. He blinks, for the road has come to an end as well, a familiar end, although unexpected. Before him looms a giant polychrome monkey head, leering brightly. This head is two stories high, it has flapping ears and wheel-size eyes, and its gaping mouth, opened in a silent howl, is large enough for a gaggle of schoolchildren to rush through, screaming their excitement.

Now he knows where he is, where Tiny Doom has led him to, predictable, actually, the most magical of all childhood places: *Woodward's Garden, Fun for All Occasions, Not Occasionally but Always.*

How oft has Hardhands been to Woodward's (in cheerful daylight), and ah the fun he has had there (in cheerful daylight): The Circular Boat and the Mystery Manor, the Zoo of Pets, and the Whirla-Gig. Pink popcorn and strawberry cake, and Madam Twanky's Fizzy Lick-A-Rice Soda. Ah, Woodward's Garden and the happy smell of sun, sugar, sweat and sizzling meat. But at Woodward's, the fun ends at sundown, as evening's chill begins to rise, the rides begin to shut, the musick fades away and everyone must go, exiting out the Monkey's Other End. Woodward's is not open at night.

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But here, tonight, the Monkey's Eyes are open, although his smile is a grimace, less Welcome and more Beware. The Monkey's Eyes roll like red balls in their sockets, and at each turn they display a letter: "F" "U" "N" they spell in flashes of sparky red. Something skitters at our boy's ankles and he jumps: scraps of paper flickering like shredded ghosts. The Monkey's Grin is fixed, glaring, in the dark it does not seem at all like the Gateway to Excitement and Adventure, only Digestion and Despair. Surely even Doom, despite her ravenous adoration of the Circular Boat, would not be tempted to enter the hollow throat just beyond the poised glittering teeth. Despite the promise of the Monkey's Rolling Eyes, there is no Fun here.

Or is there? Look again. Daylight, a tiara of letters crowns the Monkey's Head, spelling *Woodward's Garden* in cheery lights. But not tonight, tonight the tiara is a crown of spikes, whose glittering red letters proclaim a different title: *Madam Rose's Flower Garden*.

Hardhands closes his eyes against the flashes, feeling all the blood in his head blushing downward into his pinchy toes. Madam Rose's Flower Garden! It cannot be. Madam Rose's is a myth, a rumor, an innuendo, a whisper. A prayer. The only locale in Califa where entities, it is said, can walk in the Waking World without constraint, can move and do as their Will commands, and not be constrained by the Will of a magician or adept. Such mixing is proscribed, it's an abomination, against all laws of nature, and until this very second, Hardhands thought, mere fiction.

And yet apparently not fiction at all. The idea of Tiny Doom in such environs sends Hardhands' scalp a-shivering. This is worse than having her out on the streets. Primo child-flesh, delicious and sweet, and plump full of such energy as would turn the most mild mannered elemental into a rival of Choronzon, the Dæmon of Dispersion. Surrounded by dislocated elementals and egregores, under no obligation and bound by no sigil, indulging in every depraved whim. Surely the tiresome child did not go forward to her own certain doom?

But his burbling tum, his swimming head, knows she did.

If he were not Banastre Haðraaða, the Grand Duque of Califa, this is the point where'd he'd turn about and go home. First he might sit upon the ground, right here in the dirt, and wallow for a while in discouragement, then he'd rise, dust, and retreat. If he were not himself, but someone else,

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someone lowly, he might be feeling pretty low. He's a strong magician, and sure of his powers, but he has never faced any magickal being that he did not control, and the thought of standing as equals with who-knows-what is daunting.

For a moment, he is not himself, he is cold and tired and hungry and ready for the evening to end. It was fun to be furious, his anger gave him forward motion and will and fire, but now he wants to be home in his downy-soft bed with a yellow nasty newsrag and a jorum of hot wine. If Wish could be made Will in a heartbeat, he'd be lying back on damask pillows, drowsing away to happy dreamland. Perhaps, he should just go home and —

A voice breaks his morose reverie:

"Well, now, your grace. Slumming?"

Then does Hardhands notice a stool sitting to one side of the Monkey's Grin, and upon the stool a boy sitting, legs dangling, swinging copper-toed button boots back and forth. A pocketknife flashes in his hand; shavings flutter downward. He's tow-headed, blue-eyed, freckled and tan, and he's wearing a polka-dotted kilt, a redingcote, and a smashed bowler. A smoldering stogie hangs down from his lips.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind, never mind. Are you here for the auction?"

He had decided to arm himself in arrogance, and so he replies arrogantly: "I am looking for a child and a pink pig."

The boy says, brightly, "Oh yes, of course. They passed this way some time ago."

Hardhands makes move to go inside, but is halted by the red velvet rope that acts as barrier to the Monkey's mouth.

"Do you have a ticket? It's fifteen divas, all you can eat and three trips to the bar."

Remembering his empty pockets, Hardhands says loftily: "I'm on the List."

The List: Another powerful weapon. If you are on it, all to the good. If not, back to the Icy Arrogance. But when has Hardhands not been on the list? Never! Unthinkable!

"Let me see," says the Boy. He turns out pockets, and thumps his vest, fishes papers, and strings, candy and fishhooks, bones and lights, a white

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rat, and a red rubber ball. "I know I had it somewhere — Ahah!" This ahah is addressed to his hat, what interior he is excavating and out of which he draws a piece of red foolscap. "Let me see...um... *Virex the Sucker of Souls, Zigurex Avatar of Agony, Valefor Teller of Tales*, no, I'm sorry your grace, but you are not on the list. That will be fifteen divas."

"Get out of my way."

Hardhands takes a pushy step forward, only to find that his feet cannot come off the ground. The Boy, the Gatekeeper, smells like human but he has powerful praeterhuman push.

"Let me by."

"What's the magick word?"

"☾♓❑◆♋● ♇◆♎♏■♌♋&."

This word should blossom like fire in the sultry air, it should spout lava and sparks and smell like burning tar. It should shrink the Boy down to stepping-upon size.

It glints briefly, like a wet sparkler, and gutters away.

He tries again, this time further up the Barbarick alphabet, heavier on the results.

"☾♓❑◆♋● ♑♐♋❒◆♏."

This word should suck all the light out of the world, leaving a blackness so utter the Boy will be gasping for enough breath to scream.

It casts a tiny shadow, like a gothick's smile, and then brightens.

"Great accent," says the Boy. He is grinning sympathetically, which enrages Hardhands even more, because he is the Pontifexa's grandson and there's nothing to be sorry about for *that*. "But not magickal enough."

Hardhands is flummoxed, this is a first, never before has his magick been stifled, tamped, failed to light. Barbarick is tricky, it is true. In the right mouth the right Barbarick word will explode the Boy into tiny bits of bouncing ectoplasm, or shatter the air as though it were made of ice, or turn the moon into a tulip. The right word in the wrong mouth, a mouth that stops when it should glottal or clicks when it should clack, could turn his tummy into a hat, roll back time, or turn his blood to fire. But, said right or said wrong, Barbarick never does nothing. His tummy is, again, tingling.

The Boy is now picking his teeth with the tip of his knife. "I give you a hint. The most magickal word of them all."

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What's more magick than ✠✠✠✠✠, or ⊱⊱⊱⊱⊱⊱? Is there a more magickal word that Hardhands has never heard of? He's an adept of the sixth order, he's peeked into the Abyss, surely there is no Super Special Magickal Word hidden from him yet — he furrows his pure white brow into unflattering wrinkles, and then, a tiny whiny little voice in his head says: *what's the magick word, Bwannie, what's the magick word?*

"Please," Hardhands says. "Let me pass, please."

"With pleasure," the Boy says, "But I must warn you. There are ordeals."

"No ordeal can be worse than listening to you."

"One might think so," the Boy says, "You have borne my rudeness so kindly, your grace, that I hate to ask you for one last favor, but I fear I must."

Hardhands glares at the boy, who smiles sheepishly.

"Your boots, your grace. Madama doesn't care for footwear on her clean carpets. I shall give you a ticket, and give your boots a polish and they'll be nice and shiny for you, when you leave."

Hardhands does not want to relinquish his heels, which may only add an actual half an inch in height, but are marvelous when it comes to mental stature; who cannot help but swagger in red-topped jackboots, champagne shiny and supple as night?

He sighs, bending. The grass below is cool against our hero's hot feet, once liberated happily from the pinchy pointy boots (ah vanity, thy name is only sixteen years old) but he'd trade the comfort, in a second, for height.

He hops and kicks, sending one boot flying at the kid (who catches it easily) and the other off into the darkness.

"Mucho gusto. Have a swell time, your grace."

Hardhands stiffens his spine with arrogance and steps into the Monkey's Grin.

VII. Time's Trick

Motion moves in the darkness around him, a glint of silver, to one side, then the other, then in front of him: he jumps. Then he realizes that the form ahead of him is familiar: his own reflection. He steps forward, and the Hardhands before him resolves into a Hardhands behind him, while

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those to the other side move with him, keeping pace. For a second he hesitates, thinking to run into mirror, but an outstretched arm feels only empty air, and he steps once, again, then again, more confidently. His reflection has disappeared; ahead is only darkness.

So he continues on, contained with a hollow square of his own reflections, which makes him feel a bit more cheerful, for what can be more reassuring but an entire phalanx of your own beautiful self? Sure, he looks a bit tattered: bare chest, sticky hair, blurred eyeliner, but it's a sexy tattered, bruised and battered, and slightly forlorn. He could start a new style with this look: *After the Deluge*, it could be called, or, *A Rough Night*.

Of course Woodward's has a hall of mirrors too, a horrifying place where the glasses stretch your silver-self until you look like an emaciated crane, or squash you down, round as a beetle. These mirrors continue, as he continues, to show only his perfect self, disheveled, but still perfect. He laughs, a sound which, pinned in on all sides as it is, quickly dies. If this is the Boy's idea of an Ordeal, he's picked the wrong man. Hardhands has always loved mirrors, so much so that he has them all over his apartments: on his walls, on his ceilings, even, in his Conjuring Closet, on the floor. He's never met a reflection of himself he didn't love, didn't cherish, cheered up by the sight of his own beauty — what a lovely young man, how blissful to be me!

He halts and fumbles in his kilt-pocket for his favorite lip rouge (*Death in Bloom*, a sort-of blackish pink) and reapplies. Checks his teeth for color, and blots on the back of his hand. Smoothes one eyebrow with his fingertip, and arranges a strand of hair so it is more fetchingly askew — then leans in, closer. A deep line furrows behind his eyes, a line where he's had no line before, and there, at his temple, is that a strand of gray amidst the silver? His groping fingers feel only smoothness on his brow, he smiles and the line vanishes, he grips the offending hair and yanks: in his grasp it is as pearly as ever. A trick of the poor light then, and on he goes, but sneaking glances to his left and right, not from admiration, but from concern.

As he goes, he keeps peeking sideways and at each glance, he quickly looks away again, alarmed. Has he always slumped so badly? He squares his shoulders, and peeks again. His hinder, it's huge, like he's got a caboose

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under his kilt, and his chin, it's as weak as custard. No, it must just be a trick of the light, his hinder is high and firm, and his chin as hard and curved as granite, he's overstressed and overwrought and he still has all that sugar in his system. His gaze doggedly forward, he continues down the silver funnel, picks up his feet, eager, perhaps for the first time ever, to get away from a mirror.

The urge to glance is getting bigger and bigger, and Hardhands has, before, always vanquished temptation by yielding to it, he looks again, this time to his right. There, he is as lovely as ever, silly silly. He grins confidently at himself, that's much better. He looks behind him and sees, in another mirror, his own back looking further beyond, but he can't see what he's looking at or why.

Back to the slog, and the left is still bugging him, he's seeing flashes out of the corner of his eye, and he just can't help it, he must look: his eyes, they are sunken like marbles into his face, hollow as a sugar skull, his skin tightly pulled, painted with garish red cheekbones. Blackened lips pull back from grayish teeth — his pearly white teeth! — He chatters those pearly whites together, his bite is firm and hard. He looks to the right and sees himself, as he should be.

Now he knows, don't look to the left, keep to the right and keep focused, the left is a mirage, the right is reality. The left side is a horrible joke and the right side is true, but even as he increases his steps to almost a run (will this damn hallway never end?), the Voice of Vanity in his head is questioning that assertion. Perhaps the right side is the horrible joke, and the left side the truth, perhaps he has been blind to his own flaws, perhaps — he can't help it, he looks.

This time: he is transfixed at the image that stares back, as astonished as he is: he's an absolute wreck. His hair is still and brittle, hanging about his knobby shoulders like salted sea grass. His ice blue eyes look cloudy, and the thick black lines drawn about them serve only to sink them deeper into his skull. Scars streak lividly across his cheeks. Sunken chest and tattoos faded into blue and green smudges, illegible on slack skin. He's too horrified to seek reassurance in the mirror now behind him, he's transposed on the horror before him: the horror of his own inevitable wreckage and decay. The longer he stares the more hideous he becomes. The image blurs for a moment, and then blood blooms in his hair and dribbles from

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his gaping lips, his shoulders are scratched and smudged with black, his eyes starting from his skull. He is surrounded by swirling snow, flecks of which sputter on his eyelashes, steam as they touch his skin. The shaft of an arrow protrudes from his throat.

"Oh how bliss to be me," the Death's Head croaks, each word a bubble of blood.

With a shout, Hardhands raises his right fist and punches. His fist meets the glass with a nauseating jolt of pain that rings all the way down to his toes. The glass bows under his blow but doesn't crack. He hits again, his corpse reels back, clutching itself with claw-like hands. The mirror refracts into a thousand diamond shards, and Hardhands throws up his other arm to ward off glass and blood. When he drops his shield, the mirrors and their Awful Reflection are gone.

He stands on the top of stairs, looking out over a tumultuous vista. There's a stage with feathered denizens dancing the hootchie-coo. Behind the hootchie-coochers, a band plays a ferocious double-time waltz. Before the hootchies, couples slide and twist and turn to the musick, their feet flickering so quickly they spark. The scene is much like the scene he left behind at the Blue Duck, only instead of great big hair, there are great big horns, instead of sweeping skirts there are sweeping wings, instead of smoke there is coldfire. The musick is loud enough to liquefy his skull, he can barely think over its howling sweep.

The throng below whirls about in confusion — denizens, demons, egregores, servitors — was that a Bilskinir-Blue Bulk he saw over there at the bar, tusks a-gleaming, Butler Paimon on his damn night off? No matter even if it is Paimon, no holler for help from Hardhands, oh no. Paimon would have to help him out, of course, but Paimon would tell the Pontifexa for sure, for Paimon, in addition to being the Butler of Bilskinir, is a suck-up. No thanks, our hero is doing just fine on his own. He would like to see some uppity egregore try to snack on him — just try!

A grip pulls at Hardhands' soft hand, he looks down into the wizened grinning face of a monkey. Hardhands tries to yank from the grasp, the monkey has pretty good pull, which he puts into gear with a yank, that our hero has little choice but to follow. A bright red cap shaped like a flower pot is affixed to Sieur Simian's head by a golden cord, and he's surprisingly

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good at the upright; his free hand waves a path through the crowd, pulling Hardhands behind like a toy.

The dancers slide away from the monkey's push, letting Hardhands and his guide through their gliding. By the band, by the fiddler, who is sawing away at his fiddle as though each note was a gasp of air and he a suffocating man, his hair flying with sweat, his face burning with concentration. Toward a flow of red velvet obscuring a doorway, and through the doorway into sudden hush, the cessation of the slithering music leaving sudden silence in Hardhands' head.

Now he stands on a small landing, overlooking a crowded room. The Great Big Horns and Very Long Claws and etc. are alert to something sitting upon a dais at the far end of the room. Hardhands follows their attention and goes cold all the way to his bones.

Upon the dais is a table. Upon the table is a cage. Within the cage: Tiny Doom.

VIII. Cash & Carry

Here is Hardhands, standing struck horrified at the scene before him. The bidding has already started. A hideous figure our hero recognizes as Zigurex the Avatar of Agony is flipping it out with a dæmon whose melty visage and dribbly hair Hardhands does not know. Their paddles are popping up and down, in furious volley to the furious patter of the auctioneer:

"...unspoiled untouched pure one hundred percent kid-flesh plump and juicy tender and sweet highest grade possible never been spanked whacked or locked in a closet for fifty days with no juice no crackers no light fed on honeydew and chocolate sauce...."

(Utter lie, Tiny Doom is in a cheesy noodle phase and if it's not noodles and it's not orange then she ain't gonna eat it, no matter the dire threat.) Tiny Doom is barking, frolicking about the cage happily, she's the center of attention, she's up past her bedtime and she's a *puppy*. It's fun!

The auctioneer is small, delicate, and apparently human, although Hardhands is willing to bet that she's probably none of these at all, and she has the patter down: "Oh she's darling oh she's bright she'll fit on your mantel, she'll sleep on your dog-bed, she's compact and cute now, and ah

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the blood you can breed from her when she's older. What an investment, sell her now, sell her later, you're sure to repay your payment a thousand times over and a free Pig as garnish can you beat the deal — and see how bright she does bleed."

The minion hovering above the cage displays a long length of silver tipped finger and then flicks downward. Tiny Doom yelps, and the rest of the patter is lost in Hardhands' roar as he leaps forward, pushing spectators aside: "That is my wife!"

His leap is blocked by bouncers, who thrust him backward, but not far. Ensues: rumpus, with much switching and swearing and magickal sparkage. Hardhands may have Words of Power, and a fairly Heavy Fist for one so fastidious, but the bouncers have Sigils of Impenetrableness or at least Hides of Steel, and one of them has three arms, and suction cups besides.

"That is my wife!" Hardhands protests again, now pinned. "I demand that you release her to me."

"It's careless to let such a tempting small morsel wander the streets alone, your grace." Madam Rose cocks her head, her stiff wire headdress jingling, and the bouncers release Hardhands.

He pats his hair; despite the melee, still massively piled, thanks to Paimon's terrifically sticky hair pomade. The suction cups have left little burning circles on his chest, and his bare toes feel a bit tingly from connecting square with someone's tombstone-hard teeth, but at least he solaces in the fact that one of the bouncers is dripping whitish ooze from puffy lips and the other won't be breeding children anytime soon; just as hard a kick, but much more squishy. The room's a wreck, too, smashed chairs, crumpled paper, spilled popcorn, oh dear, too bad.

"She's my wife and I want her back." He makes a movement toward the cage, which is now terribly quiet, but the bouncers still bar the way.

Zigurex upsteps himself, then, looming over Hardhands, who now wishes he had been more insistent about the boots: "Come along with the bidding; it's not all night, you see, the tide is rising and the magick will soon sail."

The other dæmon, who is both squishy and scaly, bubbles his opinion, as well. At least Hardhands assumes it is his opinion, impossible to understand his blubbering, some obscure dialect of Barbarick, or maybe

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just a very bad accent, anyway who cares what he has to say, not Hardhands, not at all.

"There is no bidding, she's not for sale, she belongs to me, and Pig, too, and we are leaving," he says.

"Do you bid?" Madam Rose asks.

"No, I do not bid. I do not have to bid. She is my wife."

"One hundred fifty!" Zigurex says, last-ditch.

The Fishy Thing counters the offer with a saliva spray glug.

"He offers two hundred," says Madam Rose, "What do you offer?"

"Two hundred!" says Hardhands, outraged. "I've paid two hundred for a pot of lip rouge. She's worth a thousand if she's worth a diva — "

Which is exactly of course the entirely wrong thing to say but his outrage has gotten the better of his judgment, which was already impaired by the outrage of being manhandled like a commoner to begin with, and which also might not have been the best even before then.

Madam Rose smiles. Her lips are sparkly pink and her teeth are sparkly black. "One thousand divas, then, for her return! Cash only. Good night good night and come again!"

She claps her hands, and the bouncers start to press the disappointed bidders into removing.

"Now look here — " says Hardhands. "You can't expect me to buy my own wife, and even if you could expect me to buy my own wife, I won't. I insist that you hand her over right this very second and impede me no longer."

"Is that so?" Madam Rose purrs. The other bidders retreat easily, perhaps they have a sense of where this is all going and decide it's wise to get out of the way whilst there is still a way to get out of. Even Sieur Squishy and Zigurex go, although not without several smoldering backways looks from the Avatar of Agony, obviously a sore loser. Madam Rose sits herself down upon a velvet-covered chair, and waves Hardhands to do the same, but he does not. A majordomo has uprighted the brazier and repaired the smoldering damage, decanted tea into a brass teapot and set it upon a round brass tray. Madam Rose drops sugar cubes into two small glasses and pours over: spicy cinnamon, tangy orange.

Hardhands ignores the tea; peers into the cage to assess damage.

"Pig has a tummy ache, and wants to go home, Bwannie." The fat

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little lip is trembling and despite himself, Hardhands is overwhelmed by the tide of adorableness, against which he should, being a first-rate magician and poet, be inoculated. She is so like her mother, oh his darling sister, sometimes it makes him want to cry.

He retreats into gruff. "Ayah, so well, Pig should not have had so much candy. And nor should Pig have wandered off alone."

"He is bad," agrees Doom. "Very bad."

"Sit tight and do not cry. We will go home soon. Ayah?

"Ayah." She sniffs, but holds the snuffle, little soldier.

Madam Rose offers a glass, which he waves away, remembering anew the Pontifexa's advice, and also not trusting Madam's sparkle grin. He's heard of the dives where they slide sleep into your drink; you gulp down happily and wake up six hours later minus all you hold dear and with a splitting headache, as well. Or worse still, gin-joints that sucker you into one little sip, and then you have such a craving that you must have more and more, but no matter how much you have, it shall never be enough. He'll stay dry and alert, thank you.

"I have no time for niceties, or social grace," he says, "I will take my wife and pig, and leave."

"One thousand divas is not so great a sum to the Pontifexa's grandson," Madam Rose observes. "And it's only right that I should recoup some of my losses — look here, I shall have to redecorate, and fashionable taste, as your grace knows, is not cheap."

"I doubt there is enough money in the world to buy you good taste, madama, and why should I pay for something that is mine?"

"Now who owns who, really? *She* is the Heir to the House Haðraaða, and one day she'll be Pontifexa. *You* are just the boy who does. By rights all of us, including you, belong to her, in loyalty and in love. I do wish you would sit, your grace." Madam Rose pats the pillow beside her, which again he ignores.

This statement sets off a twinge of rankle because it is true. It may be true, but it's his business, not hers, and so Hardhands answers loftily, "We are all the Pontifexa's obedient servants, and are happy to bend ourselves to her Will, and her Will in the matter of her Heir is clear. I doubt that she would be pleased to know of the situations of this night."

Madam Rose sets her red cup down. An ursine-headed minion offers

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her a chocolate, gently balanced between two pointy bear-claws. She opens red lips, black teeth, long red throat and swallows the chocolate without a chew.

"I doubt," she says, "that the Pontifexa shall be pleased at tonight's situation at all. I do wish you would sit, your grace. I feel so small, and you so tall, so high above. And do sample, your grace. I assure you that my candy has no extra spice to it, just wholesome goodness you will find delicious. You have my word upon it."

Hardhands sits, and takes the chocolate he is offered. He's already on the train bound for Purgelandia, he might as well make the journey worth the destination, and anyway no one would poison chocolate, sacred as it is to the Goddess Califa. The Minion twinkles azure bear eyes at him. Bears don't exactly have the right facial arrangement to smirk, but this bear is making a fine attempt, and Hardhands thinks what a fine rug Sieur Oso would make, stretched out before a peaceful fire. In the warmth of his mouth, the chocolate explodes into glorious peppery chocolate yum. For a second he closes his eyes against the delicious darkness, all his senses receding into sensation of pure bliss dancing on his tongue.

"It is good chocolate, is it not?" Madam Rose asks. "Some say such chocolate should be reserved for royalty and the Goddess. But we do enjoy it, no?"

"What do you want?" Hardhands asks, and they both know that he doesn't just mean for Tiny Doom.

"Putting aside, for the moment, the thousand divas, I want nothing more than to be of aid to you, your grace, to be your humble servant. It is not what I may want from you but what you can want from me."

"That I have told you."

"Just that?"

In the cage, Tiny Doom is silent and staring; she may be a screamer, but she does, thankfully, know when to keep her trap shut.

"I can offer you no other assistance? Think on it, your grace. You are an adept, and you traffic with denizens of the deep, through the force of your Will. I am not an adept, I also have traffic with those same denizens."

The second chocolate tangs his tongue with the sour-sweet brightness of lime. "Contrary to all laws of Goddess and nature," he says thickly, when the brilliant flavor has receded enough to allow speech. "Your traffic

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is obscene. It is not the same. You deal with them as equals, when they are slaves to human Will."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Anyway, I didn't say it was the same, I said we might complement each other, rather than compete. Do you not get tired of your position, your grace? You are so close, and yet so far. The Pontifexa's brightest boy, but does she respect you? Does she trust you? This little girl, is she not the hitch in your git-along, the sand in your shoe? Leave her with me, and she'll never muss your hair again, or wrinkle your cravat."

"I don't recall inviting you to comment upon my personal matters," says Hardhands, à la prince. She says nothing he has not thought himself, but he has his own solution and will not deviate from his plan, not even for such yummy chocolate, or the promise of power. "And I don't recall offering you my friendship either."

"I cry your pardon, your grace. I only offer my thoughts in the hope — "

He's tired of the game now, if he had the thousand divas he'd fork them over, just to be quit of the entire situation, it was fun, it was cool, it's not fun it's not cool, he's bored, the sugar is drilling a spike through his forehead and he's done.

"I'll write you a draft, and you'll take it, and we shall leave, and that's the end of the situation," Hardhands says loftily.

Madam Rose sighs, and sips her tea. Another sigh, another sip.

"I'm sorry, your grace, but if you cannot pay, then I must declare your bid null, and reopen the auction. Please understand my position. It is, and has always been, the policy of this House to operate on a cash basis; I'm sure you understand why — taxes, a necessary evil, but perhaps more evil than necessary." Madam Rose smiles at him, and sips again before continuing. "My reputation rests upon my policies, and that I apply them fairly to all. Duque of Califa or the lowliest servitor, all are equal within my walls. So you see, if I allow you license I have refused others, how shall it appear then?"

"Smart," answers our hero. "Prudent. Wise."

Madam Rose laughs. "Would that others might consider my actions in that light, but I doubt their charity. No, I'm sorry, your grace. I have worked hard for my name. I cannot give it up, not for you nor for anyone."

She puts her tea glass down and clicks her tongue, a sharp snap that

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brings Sieur Bear to her side. "The Duque has decided to withdraw his bid; please inform Zigurex that his bid is accepted and he may come and claim his prize."

Hardhands looks at Doom in her cage, her wet little face peers through the bars. She smiles at him, she's scared but she has confidence that Bwannie will save her, Bwannie loves her. Bwannie has a sense of déjà vu; hasn't he been here before, why is it his fate to always give in to her, little monster? Tiny Doom, indeed.

"What do you want?" he repeats.

"Well," Madam Rose says brightly. "Now that you mention it. The Pontifexina is prime, oh that's true, but I know one more so. More mature, more valuable, more ready."

Now it's Hardhands' turn to sigh, which he does. "You'll let her go? Return her safe and sound?"

"Of course, your grace. You have my word on it."

"Not a hair on her head or a drop from her veins or a tear from her eye? Not a scab, or nail, or any part that might be later used against her? Completely whole? Untouched, unsmudged, no tricks?"

"As you say."

Hardhands puts his glass down, pretending resignation. "All right, then. You have a deal."

Of course he doesn't really give in, but he's assessed that perhaps it is better to get Doom out of the way. He can play rough enough if it's only his own skin involved, but why take the chance of her collateral damage? When she's out of the way, he calculates, and Madam Rose's guard is down, then we'll see, oh yes, we'll see.

Madam Rose's shell-white hand goes up to her lips, shading them briefly behind two slender fingers. Then the fingers flip down and flick a shard of spinning coldfire toward him. Hardhands recoils, but too late. The airy kiss zings through the air like an arrow of outrageous fortune and smacks him right in the middle of Death in Bloom. The kiss feels like a kick to the head, and our hero and his chair flip backward, the floor rising to meet his fall, but not softly. The impact sends his bones jarring inside his flesh, and the jarring is his only movement, for the sigil has left him shocked and paralyzed.

He can't cry out, he can't flinch, he can only let the pain flood down

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his palate and into his brain, in which internal shouting and swearing is making up for external silence. He can't close his eyes either, but he closes his outside vision and brings into inside focus the bright sharp words of a sigil that should suck all the energy from Madam Rose's sigil, blow it into a powderpuff of oblivion.

The sigil burns bright in Hardhands' eyes, but it is also trapped and cannot get free. It sparks and wheels, and he desperately tries to tamp it out, dumping colder, blacker sigils on top of its flare, trying to fling it outward and away, but it's stuck firmly inside his solar plexus, he can fling it nowhere. It's caught in his craw like a fish bone, and he's choking but he can't choke because he cannot move. The sigil's force billows through him: it is twisting his entrails into knots, his bones into bows, it's flooding him with a fire so bright that it's black, with a fire so cold that it burns and burns and burns, his brain boils and then: nothing.

IX. Thy Baited Hook

Here is Hardhands, returning to the Waking World. His blood is mud within his veins, he can barely suck air through stifled lungs and there's a droning in his ears, no not droning, humming, Tiny Doom:

"Kick her bite her that's the way I'll spite her! Kick her bite her that's the way I'll spite her! Kick her bite her that's the way I'll spite her!"

The view aloft is raven-headed angels, with ebony black wings swooping loops of brocade across a golden ceiling. Then the view aloft is blocked by Tiny Doom's face; she still has the sugar mustache, and her kohl has blurred, cocooning her blue eyes in smoky blackness. Her hat is gone.

"Don't worry, Bwannie," she pats his stiff face with a sticky hand. "Pig will save us."

His brain heaves but the rest of him remains still. The frame of his body has never before been so confining. Diligent practice has made stepping his mind from his flesh an easy accomplishment, are there not times when a magician's Will needs independence from his blood and bones? But never before has he been stuck, nor run up against someone else's sigils as harder and more impenetrable has his own. Lying in the cage of his own flesh, he is feeling helpless, and tiny, and it's a sucky

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feeling, not at all suited to his stature of Pontifexa's grandson, first rate magician and —

"I will bite you," says Doom.

"I doubt that," is the gritty answer, a deep rumble: "My skin is thick as steel and your teeth will break."

"Ha! I am a shark and I will bite you."

"Not if I bite you first, little lovely, nip your sweet tiny fingers, crunch crunch each one, oh so delicious, what a snack. Come here, little morsel."

The weight of Tiny Doom suddenly eases off his chest, but not without kicking and gripping, holding on to him in a vice-like grip, oww, her fingers dig like nails into his leg but to no avail. Tiny Doom is wrenched off of him, and in the process he's wrenched sideways, now he's got a nice view of the grassy floor, a broken teapot, and, just on the edge, someone's feet. The feet are shod in garish two-tone boots: magenta upper and orange toe-cap. Tiny Doom screams like a rabbit, high and horrible.

"You'll bruise her," says a voice from above the feet. "And then the Pontifexa will be chuffed."

"I shall not hurt her one jot if she's a good girl, but she should shut her trap; a headache I am getting."

Good for her, Tiny Doom does not shut her trap, she opens her trap wider and shoots the moon, with a piercing squeal that stabs into Hardhands' unprotected ears like an awl, slicing all the way down to the center of his brain. With a smack, the shriek abruptly stops.

Two pretty little bare feet drift into Hardhands' view, "Stop it, you two. She must be returned in perfect condition, an' I get my deposit back. It's only the boy that the Pontifexa wants rid of; the girl is still her heir. Leave her alone, or I shall feed you both into my shredder. Chop chop. The guests are waiting and he must be prepared."

"She squirms," complains the Minion.

Madam Rose, sternly: "You, little madam, stop squirming. You had fun being a puppy, and cupcakes besides, and soon you shall be going home to your sweet little bed. How sad Grandmamma and Paimon shall be if I must give them a bad report of your behavior."

Sniffle, sniff. "But I want Bwannie."

"Never you mind Bwannie for now, here, have a Choco-Sniff, and here's one for Pig, too."

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Sniff, sniffle. "Pig don't like Choco-Sniffs."

Hardhands kicks, but its like kicking air, he can feel the movement in his mind, but his limbs stay stiff and locked. And then his mind recoils: What did Madam Rose say about the Pontifexa? Did he hear a-right? Deposit? Report?

"Here then is a jacksnap for Pig. Be a good girl, eat your candy and then you shall kiss Bwannie good-bye."

Whine: "I want to go with Bwannie!"

"Now, now," Madam Rose's cheery tone tingles with irritation, but she's making a good show of not annoying Tiny Doom into another session of shrieking. "Now, Bwannie must stay here, and you must go home — do not start up with the whining again, it's hardly fitting for the Pontifexa's heir to cry like a baby, now is it? Here, have another Choco-Sniff."

Then more harshly, "You two, get the child ready to be returned and the boy prepared. I shall be right back."

The pretty feet float from Hardhands' view and a grasp attaches to Hardhands' ankle. Though his internal struggle is mighty, externally he puts up no fuss at all. Flipped over by rough hands, he sees above him the sharp face of a Sylph, pointy eyes, pointy nose, pointy chin. Hands are fumbling at his kilt buckles; obscurely he notices that the Sylph has really marvelous hair, it's the color of fresh caramel and it smells, Hardhands notices, as the Sylph bends over to nip at his neck, like new-mown grass. A tiny jolt of pretty pain, and warm wetness dribbles down his neck.

"Ahhh...," the Sylph sighs, "You should taste this, first rate knock-back."

"Madama said be nice."

"I am being nice, as nice as pie, as nice as he is. Nice and sweet." The Sylph licks at Hardhands' neck again; its tongue is scrape-y, like a cat's, and it hurts in a strangely satisfying way. "Sweet sweet darling boy. He is going to bring our garden joy. What a deal she has made. Give the girl, but keep the boy, he's useful to us, even if she don't want him anymore. A good trick he'll turn for Madama. Bright boy."

Hardhands is hoisted aloft, demon claws at his ankles and his wrists, slinging him like a side of beef on the way to the barbeque pit. His eyes are slitted open, his head dangling downward, he can see only a narrow slice

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of floor bobbing by. A carpet patterned with entwined snakes, battered black and red tiles, white marble veined with gold. He's watching all this with part of his attention, but mainly he's churning over what Madam Rose had said about the Pontifexa. Was it possible to be true? Did Grandmamma set him up? Sell him out? Was this all a smokescreen to get him out of her hair, away from her treasure? He cannot believe it, he will not believe it, it cannot be true!

Rough movement drops Hardhands onto the cold floor, and metal clenches his ankles. The bracelets bite into his flesh as he is hoisted aloft, and all the blood rushes to his head in a explosion of pressure. For a second, even his slit of sight goes black, but then, just as suddenly, he finds he can open his eyes all the way. He rolls eyeballs upward, seeing retreating minion backs. He rolls eyes downward, seeing polished marble floor and the tangled drape of his own hair, Paimon's pomade having finally given up. The gyves are burning bright pain into his ankles, and he's swaying slightly from some invisible airflow, but the movement is kind of soothing and his back feels nice and stretched out. If it weren't for being immobilized and obvious bait, hanging upside could be kind of fun.

Our hero tries to wiggle, but can't, tries to jiggle but is still stuck. He doesn't dare try another sigil and risk blowing his brains out, and without the use of his muscles he cannot gymnastic himself free. He closes his internal eyes, slips his consciousness into darkness, and concentrates. His Will pushes and pushes against the pressure that keeps him contained, focuses into a single point that must burn through. After a second, a minute, an eternity, all bodily sensation — the burn of the gyves, the stretch of his back, the pressure of his bladder, the breeze on his face — slips away, and his Will floats alone on the Current.

Away from the strictures of his body, Hardhands' consciousness can take any form that he cares to mold it to, or no form at all, a spark of himself drifting on the Currents of Elsewhere. But such is his fondness for his own form, even Elsewhere, that when he steps lightly from the flesh hanging like a side of beef, he coalesces into a representation of himself, in every way identical to his corporeal form, although with lip rouge that will not smudge, and spectacularly elevated hair.

On Elsewhere feet, Hardhands' fetch turns to face its meaty shell, and is rather pleased with the view; even dangling upside down, he looks

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pretty darn good. Elsewhere, the sigil that has caged Hardhands' motion is clearly visible as a pulsating net of green and gold, interwoven at the interstices with splotches of pink. A Coarctation Sigil, under normal circumstances no stronger than pie, but given magnitude by the height of the Current and Hardhands' starchy condition. The fetch, however, is not limited by starch, and the Current just feeds its strength. Dismantling the constraint is the work of a matter of seconds, and after the fetch slides back into its shell, it's a mere bagatelle to contort himself down and free.

Casting free of the gyves with a splashy Barbarick command, Hardhands rubs his ankles, then stands on tingly feet. Now that he has the leisure to inspect the furnishings, he sees there are no furnishings to inspect because the room, while sumptuously paneled in gorgeous tiger-eye maple, is empty other than a curvy red velvet chaise. The only ornamentations are the jingly chains dangling from the ceiling. The floor is bare stone, cold beneath his bare feet. And now, he notices that the flooring directly under the dangle is dark and stained, with something that he suspects is a combination of blood, sweat, and tears.

Places to go and praeterhuman entities to fry, no time to linger to discover the truth of his suspicions. Hardhands turns to make his exit through the sole door, only to find that the door is gone, and in its place, a roiling black Vortex, as black and sharp as the Vortex that he himself had cut out of the Aeyther only hours before. He is pushed back by the force of the Vortex, which is spiraling outward, not inward, thus indicating that Something is coming, rather than trying to make him go.

The edges of the Vortex glow hot-black, the wind that the Vortex is creating burns his skin; he shields his eyes with his hand, and tries to stand upright, but his tingly feet cannot hold against the force, and he falls. The Vortex widens, like a surprised eye, and a slit of light appears pupil-like in its darkness. The pupil widens, becomes a pupa, a cocoon, a shell, an acorn, an egg, growing larger and larger and larger until it fills the room with unbelievable brightness, with a scorching heat that is hotter than the sun, bright enough to burn through Hardhands' shielding hand. Hardhands feels his skin pucker, his eyes shrivel, his hair start to smolder, and then, just as he is sure he is about to burst into flames, the light shatters like an eggshell, and Something has arrived.

Recently, Hardhands' Invocations have grown quite bold, and, after

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some bitter tooth and nails, he's pulled a few large fish into his circle. But those are as like to This as a fragment of beer bottle is to a faceted diamond. He knows from the top of his pulsating head to the tips of his quivering toes that this is no servitor, no denizen, no elemental. Nothing this spectacular can be called, corralled, or compelled. This apparition can be nothing but the highest of the high, the blessed of the blessed: the Goddess Califa herself.

How to describe what Hardhands sees? Words are too simple, they cannot do justice to Her infinite complexity, she's Everything and Nothing, both fractured and whole. His impressions are blurred and confused, but here's a try. Her hair is ruffled black feathers, it is slickery green snakes, it is as fluffy and lofty as frosting. Her eyes — one, two, three, four, maybe five — are as round and polished as green apples, are long tapered crimson slits, they are as flat white as sugar. She's as narrow as nightfall, She's as round as winter, She's as tall as moonrise, She's shorter than love. Her feet do not crush the little flowers, She is divine, She is fantastic.

She simply is.

Hardhands has found his footing only to lose it again, falling to his knees before her, her fresh red smile as strong as a kick to the head, to the heart. Hardhands is smitten, no not smitten, he's smote, from the tingly tingly top of his reeling head to the very tippy tip of his tingling toes. He's freezing and burning, he's alive, he's dying, he's dead. He's hypmoooootized. He gapes at the Goddess, slack-jawed and tight-handed, wanting nothing more than to reach out and grasp at her perfection, bury himself in the ruffle of her feathers. Surely a touch of Her hand would spark such fire in him that he would catch alight and perish in a blaze of exquisite agony, but it would be worth it, oh, it would be worth every cinder.

The Goddess's mouth opens, with a flicker of a velvet tongue and the glitter of a double row of white teeth. The Barbarick that flows from Her mouth in a sparkly ribband is as crisp and sweet as a summer wine, it slithers over Hardhands' flushed skin, sliding into his mouth, his eyes, his ears, and filling him with a dark sweet rumble.

"Georgiana's toy," the Goddess purrs. He didn't see Her move but now She is poured over the chaise like silk, and the bear-head minion is offering bowls of snacks, ice cream sundaes, and magazines. "Chewable and sweet, ah, lovely darling yum."

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Hardhands has forgotten Georgiana, he's forgotten Tiny Doom, he's forgotten Madam Rose, he's forgotten himself, he's forgotten his exquisite manners — no, not entirely, even the Goddess's splendor cannot expunge good breeding. He toddles up onto sweaty feet, and sweeps the floor with his curtsy.

"I am your obedient servant, your grace," he croaks.

The Goddess undulates a languid finger and he finds himself following Her beckon, not that he needs to be beckoned, he can barely hold himself aloof, wants nothing more than to throw himself forward and be swallowed alive. The Goddess spreads Her wings, Her arms, Her legs, and he falls into Her embrace, the prickle of the feathers closing over his bare skin, electric and hot.

X. Doom Acts

Here is Tiny Doom howling like a banshee, a high-pitched shriek that usually results in immediate attention to whatever need she is screaming for: more pudding, longer story, hotter bath, bubbles. The Minion under whose arm she is slung must be pitch deaf because her shrieks have not the slightest impact upon him. He continues galumphing along, whistling slightly, or perhaps that is just the breeze of his going, which is a rapid clip.

She tries teeth, her fall-back weapon and always effective, even on Paimon whose blue skin is surprisingly delicate. The Minion's hide is as chewy as rubber and it tastes like salt licorice. Spitting and coughing, Tiny Doom gives up on the bite. Kicking has no effect other than to bruise her toes and her arms are too pinned for hitting, and, down the stairs they go, bump bump, Bwannie getting farther and farther away. Pig is jolting behind them, she's got a grip on one dangly ear, but that's all, and his bottom is hitting each downward stump, but he's too soft to thump.

An outside observer might think that Doom is wailing for more candy, or perhaps is just overtired and up past her bedtime. Madam Rose certainly thought that her commotion was based in overtiredness plus a surfeit of sugar, and the Bouncer thinks it's based in spoiledness plus a surfeit of sugar, but they are both wrong. Sugar is Doom's drug of choice, she's not allowed it officially, but unofficially she has her ways (she knows exactly in what drawer the Pontifexa's secretary keeps his stash of

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Crumbly Crem-O's and Jiffy-Ju's, and if that drawer is empty, Relais can be relied upon to have a box of bonbons hidden from Hardhands in the bottom of his wardrobe), and so her system can tolerate massive quantities of the stuff before hyperactivity and urpyness sets in.

No. She is wailing because every night, at tuck-in time, after the Pontifexa has kissed her and kissed Pig and together they have said their prayers, then Paimon sits on the edge of Tiny Doom's big white frilly bed and tells her a story. It's a different story every night, Paimon's supply of fabulosity being apparently endless, but always with the same basic theme:

Kid is told what To Do.

Kid does Not Do what Kid is told To Do.

Kid gets into Bad Trouble with various Monsters.

Kid gets Eaten.

The End, yes you may have one more drink of water, and then no more excuses and it's lights out, and to sleep. Now.

Tiny Doom loves these stories, whose Directives and Troubles are always endlessly inventively different, but which always turn out the same way: with a Giant Monstrous Burp. She knows that Paimon's little yarns are for fun only, that Kids do not really get eaten when they do not do what they are told, for she does not do what she is told all the time, and she's never been eaten. Of course, no one would dare eat her anyway, she's the Pontifexina, and has Paimon and Pig besides. Paimon's stories are just stories, made to deliciously shiver her skin, so that afterward she lies in the haze of the nightlight, cuddled tight to Pig's squishiness, and knows that she is safe.

But now, tonight, she's seen the gleam in Madam Rose's eye and seen the look she gave her minions and Tiny Doom knew instantly that Bwannie is in Big Trouble. This is not bedtime, there is no Paimon, and no nightlight, and no drink of water. This is all true Big Trouble and Tiny Doom knows exactly where Big Trouble ends.

Thus, shrieking.

"Bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanie!" Doom cries, "Bwaaaaaaaaaaaanie!"

They jump the last step, Tiny Doom jolting bony hip, oww, and then round a corner. Doom sucks in the last useless shriek. She must escape the Minion, she and Pig must get back to Bwannie and save him, and she must

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hurry. Her top half is hanging backward over the servitor's shoulder and her dangling down head is starting to feel tight, plus the shrieking has left her breathless, so for a few seconds she gulps in air. Gulping, her nose running yucky yuck. She wiggles, whispers, and lets go of Pig.

He plops down onto the dirty floor, hinder up and snout down, and then they round another corner and he's gone.

She lifts her head, twisting her neck, and there's the hairy interior of a pointy ear.

She shouts: "Hey, Minion!"

"I ain't listening," says the Minion. "You can shout all you want, but I ain't listening. Madam told me not to listen and I ain't."

"I gotta pee!"

"You gotta wait," the Minion says, "You be home soon and then you can pee in your own pot. And you ain't gotta shout in my ear. You make my brain hurt, you loudness little bit, you."

"I gotta pee right now!" Doom, still shouting, anyway, just in case there are noises behind them. "I'M GONNA PEE NOW!"

The Minion stops and shifts Tiny Doom around like a sack full of flour, and breathes into her face. "You don't pee on me, loudness."

Like Paimon, the Minion has tusks and pointy teeth but Paimon's tusks are polished white and his teeth sparkle like sunlight, and his breath smells always of cloves. The Minion's tusks are rubbed and worn, his teeth yucky yellow, and he's got bits of someone caught between them.

Doom wrinkles her nose and holds her breath and says in a whine: "I can't help it, I have to go, my hot chocolate is all done." Her feet are dangling and she tries to turn the wiggle into a kick, but she can't quite reach the Minion's soft bits, and her purple slippers wiggle at empty air.

"You pee on me and I snack you up, nasty baby." The minion crunches spiny fangs together, clashing sparks. "Delish!"

"You don't dare!" says Tiny Doom stoutly. "I am the Pontifexina and my grandmamma would have your knobby hide if you munch me!"

"An' I care, little princess, if you piss me wet, I munch you dry — "

"☞☞☜✌✖☜✌✖" whispers Tiny Doom and spits. She's got a good wad going, and it hits the Minion right on the snout.

The Minion howls and drops her. She lands on stingy sleepy feet, falls over, and then scrambles up, stamping. The Minion is also stamping, and

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holding his hairy hands to his face; under his clawing fingers, smoke is steaming. He careens this way and that, Doom dodging around his staggers, and then she scoots by him, and back the way they had just come.

Tiny Doom runs as fast as her fat little legs will run, her heart pounding because she is now in Big Trouble, and she knows if the Minion quits dancing and starts chasing, she's going to be Eaten too. The hot word she spit burned her tongue and that hurts too, and where's Pig? She goes around another corner, thinking she'll see the stairs that they came down, but she doesn't, she sees another long hallway. She turns around to go back, and then the Minion blunders toward her, his face a melt-y mess, and she reverses, speedily.

"I dance around in a ring and suppose and the secret sits in the middle and knows." She sings very quietly to herself as she runs.

Carpet silent under her feet; a brief glimpse of another running Doom reflected off a glass curio cabinet; by a closed door, the knob turns but the door will not open. She can feel the wind of closing in beating against her back, but she keeps going. The demon is shouting mean things at her, but she keeps going.

"You dance around in a ring and suppose and the secret sits in the middle and knows."

A door opens and a were-flamingo trips out, stretching its long neck out; Doom dodges around its spindly legs, ignoring yelps. Ahead, more stairs, and there she aims, having no other options, can't go back and there's nowhere to go sideways.

At the top of the stairs, Doom pauses and finally looks behind. The Minion has wiped most of his melt off, livid red flares burn in his eye sockets and he looks pretty mad. The were-flamingo has halted him, and they are wrangling, flapping wings against flapping ears. The minion is bigger but the were-flamingo has a sharp beak — rapid-fire pecking at the minion's head. The minion punches one humongous fist and down the flamingo goes, in a flutter of pink feathers.

"I snack you, spitty baby!" the Minion howls and other things too mean for Doom to hear.

"We dance around in a ring and suppose and the secret sits in the middle and knows."

Doom hoists herself up on the banister, squeezing her tummy against

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the rail. The banister on the Stairs of Infinite Demonstration, Bilskinir's main staircase, is fully sixty feet long. Many is the time that Doom has swooped down its super-polished length, flying miles through the air, at the end to be received by Paimon's perfect catch. This rail is much shorter, and there's no Paimon waiting, but here we go!

She flings her legs over, and slides off. Down she goes, lickety-split, bumping over splinters, but still getting up a pretty good whoosh. Here comes the demon, waving angry arms, he's too big to slide, so he galumphs down the stairs, clumpty clump, getting closer. Doom hits the end of the banister and soars onward another five feet or so, then ooph, hits the ground, owww. She bounces back upward, and darts through the foyer and into the mudroom beyond, pulling open her pockets as she goes.

Choco-sniffs and jack-snaps skitter across the parquet floor, rattling and rolling. Sugarbunnies and beady-eyes, jimjoos and honeybuttons scatter like shot. Good-bye crappy candy, good-bye yummy candy, good-bye.

"I DANCE AROUND A RING AND SUPPOSE AND THE SECRET SITS IN THE MIDDLE AND KNOWS."

Ahead, a big red door, well barred and bolted, but surely leading Out. The bottom bolt snaps back under her tiny fingers, but the chains are too high and tippy-toe, hopping, jumping will not reach them. The Demon is down the stairs, he's still shouting and steaming, and the smell of charred flesh is stinky indeed.

A wall rack hangs by the door, and from it coats and cloaks dangle like discarded skins; Doom dives into the folds of cloth and becomes very small and silent. She's a good hider, Tiny Doom, she's learned against the best (Paimon).

Her heart pounds thunder in her ears, and she swallows her panting. When Paimon makes discovery (*if* he makes discovery), it means only bath-time, or mushy peas, or toenail clipping. If the demon finds her, Pontifexina or not, it's snicky snack time for sure. She really does have to potty too, pretty bad. She crosses her ankles and jiggles her feet, holding.

In the other room, out of sight, comes yelling, shouting, roaring, and then a heavy thud that seems to shake the very walls. The thud reverberates and then fades away.

Silence.

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Stillness.

Tiny Doom peeks between the folds. Through the archway she sees rolling candy and part of a sprawled bulk. Then the bulk heaves, hooves kicking. The demon's lungs have reinflated and he lets out a mighty horrible roar — the nastiest swear word that Tiny Doom has ever heard. Doom, who had poked her head all the way out for a better view, yanks back just in time. The Word, roiling like mercury, howls by her, trailing sparks and smelling of shit.

A second roar is gulped off in mid-growl, and turns into a shriek, which is then muffled in thumping and slurping, ripping, and chomping. Doom peeks again: the demon's legs are writhing, wiggling, and kicking. A thick stain spreads through the archway, gooey and green. Tiny Doom wiggles her way out of the velvet and runs happily toward the slurping sound.

XI. Desire Gratified

Inside the Goddess's embrace, Hardhands is dying, he's crying, he's screaming with pleasure, with joy, crying his broken heart out. He's womb-enclosed, hot and smothering, and reduced to his pure essence. He has collapsed to a single piercing pulsing point of pleasure. He has lost himself, but he has found everything else.

And then his ecstasy is interrupted by another piercing sensation: pain. Not the exquisite pain of a well-placed needle or perfectly laid lash, but an ugly pain that gnaws into his pleasurable nonexistence in an urgent painful way. He wiggles, tossing, but the pain will not go away, it only gnaws deeper, and with each razor nibble it slices away at his ecstasy. The Goddess's attention is distracted, and her withdrawal is excruciating. As he is torn away from the Goddess's pleasure, he is forced back into himself, and the wiggly body-bound part of himself realizes that the Goddess is sucking him out of life. The love-torn spirit part of him does not care. He struggles, trying to dive down deeper into the bottomless divine love, but that gnawing pain is tethering him to the Waking World, and he can't kick it free.

Then the Goddess's attention lifts from him, like a blanket torn away. He lies abandoned on the ground, the stones slick and cold against his bare

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skin. The echo of his loss pounds in his head, farrier-like, stunning him. A shrill noise pierces his agony, cuts through the thunder, a familiar high-pitched whine:

"Ya! Ya! Ya!"

His eyes are filled with sand; it takes a moment of effort before his nerveless hands can find his face, and knuckle his vision clear. Immediately he sees: Tiny Doom, dancing with the bear-headed Minion. Sieur Oso is doing the Mazorca, a dance that requires a great deal of jumping and stamping, and he's got the perfect boots to make the noise, each one as big as horse's head. Tiny Doom is doing the Ronde-loo, weaving round and round Sieur Oso, her circular motion too sickmaking for Hardhands to follow.

Then he realizes: no, they are not dancing, Sieur Oso is trying to squash Tiny Doom like a bug, and she, rather than run like a sensible child, is actually taunting him on. Oh Haðraaða!

Dimly Tiny Doom's husband sparks the thought that perhaps he should help her, and he's trying to figure out where his feet are, so as to arise to this duty, when his attention is caught by a whirl, not a whirl, a Vortex the likes of which he has never before seen, a Vortex as black as ink, but streaked hot pink, and furious furious. Though he can see nothing but the cutting blur of the spin, he can feel the force of the fight within; the Goddess is battling it out with something, something strong enough to give her a run for her divas, something tenacious and tough.

"Bwannie! Bwannie!" cries Doom. She is still spinning, and the Minion is starting to look tuckered, his stomps not so stompy anymore, and his jeers turned to huffy puffs. Foam is dribbling from his muzzle, like whipped cream.

Hardhands ignores Tiny Doom.

"✌❖♋◆■♦!" Hardhands grates, trying to throw a Word of Encouragement into the mix, to come to his darling's aid. The Word is a strong one, even in his weakened state, but it bounces off the Vortex, harmless, spurned, just as he has been spurned. The Goddess cares nothing for Hardhands' love, for his desire, he chokes back tears and staggers to his feet, determined to help somehow, even if he must cast himself into the fire to do so.

Before he can do anything so drastic, there is the enormous sound of

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suction sucking in. For a split second, Hardhands feels himself go as flat as paper, his lungs suck against his chest, his bones slap into ribbands, his flesh becomes as thin as jerky. The Current pops like a cork, the world re-inflates and Hardhands is round and substantial again, although now truly bereft. The Goddess is gone.

The Vortex has blushed pink now, and its spin is slowing, slower, slower, until it is no longer a Vortex, but a little pink blur, balanced on pointy toes, ears flopping — what the hell?

Pig?

He has gone insane, or blind, or both? In one dainty pirouette Pig has soared across the room and latched himself to the Minion's scraggly throat. Suddenly invigorated, Sieur Oso does a pirouette of his own, upward, gurgling.

"What is going on — !" Madam Rose's voice rises high above the mayhem-noises, then it chokes. She has stalled in the doorway, more minions peering from behind her safety. Tiny Doom has now attached to Sieur Oso's hairy ankle and her grip — hands and teeth — is not dislodged by his antic kicking, though whether the minion is now dancing because Tiny Doom is gnawing on his ankle or because his throat is a massive chewy-mess, it's hard to say. Pig disengages from Sieur Oso and leaps to Madam Rose, who clutches him to her bosom in a maternal way, but jerkily, as though she wants less of his love, not more. Her other slaveys have scarpered, and now that the Goddess is gone, Hardhands sees no particular reason to linger either.

He flings one very hard Barbarick word edgewise at the antic bear. Sieur Oso jerks upward, and his surprised head sails backward, tears through the tent wall, and is gone. Coldfire founts up from the stump of his neck, sizzling and sparky. Hardhands grabs Tiny Doom away from the minion's forward fall, and she grasps onto him monkey-wise, clinging to his shoulders.

"Pig!" she screams, "Pig!"

Madam Rose manages to disentangle Pig, and flings him toward Hardhands and Tiny Doom. Pig sails through the air, his ears like wings, and hits Hardhands' chest with a soggy thud and then tumbles downward. Madam Rose staggers, she is clutching her throat, her hair has fallen down, drippy red. Above her, the ceiling is flickering with tendrils of coldfire, it

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pours down around her like fireworks falling from the sky, sheathing her bones in glittering flickering flesh. The coldfire crawls over the walls, scorching the raven angels, and the whole place is going to go: coldfire doesn't burn like non-magickal fire, but it is hungry and does consume, and Hardhands has had enough consumption for tonight. Hefting Tiny Doom up higher on his shoulder, he turns about to retreat (run away).

"Pig! Pig!" Tiny Doom beats at his head as he ducks under the now flickering threshold, "PIG!"

The coldfire has raced across the roof beyond him and the antechamber before him is a heaving weaving maelstrom of magick, the Current bubbling and sucking, oh it's a shame to let such yummy power go to waste, but now is perhaps not the time to test his control further. Madam Rose staggers out of the flames, the very air around her is bubbling and cracking, spitting Abyss through cracks in the Current, black tendrils that coil and smoke.

Tiny Doom, still screaming: "Pig!"

Hardhands jumps and weaves through the tentacles of flame, flinging banishings as he goes, and the tendrils snap away. He's not going to stop for Pig, Pig is on his own, Hardhands can feel the Current boiling, in a moment there will be too much magick for the space to contain, there is going to be a giant implosion, and he's had enough implosions for one night. Through the auction room they run, scattering cheese platters, waiters, cocktails and conversationists, crunching crackers underfoot, knocking down a minion — there — open veranda doors, and beyond those doors, the sparkle of hurdy-gurdy lights. Doom clinging to his head like a pinchy hat, he leaps over the bar, through breaking bottles and scattered ice, and through the doors, and into blessed cool air. There ahead — the back of the Monkey's Head — keeping running, through gasps and a pain in his side.

Through the dark throat — for a second Hardhands thinks for sure the Grin will snap shut, and they will be swallowed forever, but no, he leaps the tombstone teeth and they are clear. The sky above turns sheet white, and the ground shifts beneath his feet in a sudden bass roll. He sits down hard in the springy grass, lungs gasping. Tiny Doom collapses from his grasp and rolls like a little barrel across the springy turf. The stars wink back in, as though a veil has been drawn back, and suddenly Hardhands is

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limp with exhaustion. The Current is gone. The Monkey's Grin still grins, but his glittering letter halo is gone, and his eyes are dim. Madam Rose's is gone, as well.

Well, good riddance, good-bye, adios, farewell. From the Monkey's Grin, Pig tippy-dances, pirouetting toward Doom, who receives him with happy cries of joy.

Hardhands lies on the grass and stares upward at the starry sky, and he moves his head back and forth, drums his feet upon the ground, wiggles his fingers just because he can. He feels drained and empty, and sore as hell. The grass is crispy cool beneath his bare sweaty back, and he could just lie there forever. Behind the relief of freedom, however, there's a sour sour taste.

He was set up. The whole evening was nothing but a gag. His grandmother, his darling sweet grandmother whom he did not kill out of love, respect, and honor, whom he pulled back from the brink of assassination because he held her so dear, his grandmamma sold him to Madam Rose.

Him, Hardhands, sold!

The Pontifexa has played them masterfully: Relais's incompetence, Tiny Doom's greed, Madam Rose's cunning, and his own sense of duty and loyalty. He'd gone blindly in to save Tiny Doom and she was the bait and he the stupid stupid prey, all along.

"Bwannie!" Tiny Doom pinches his arm, hard, but he is insensate to the physical pain. "The Minion almost ate me but I spit in his eye and he chased me and I ran into a bird and flew down the banister and the Minion called me bad bad things and then he slipped on my candy and Pig ate him and then we came running back to save you Bwannie from being eaten and Pig fought and won and now we are heroes and we should get a big reward for being so nice and saving you and Bwannie, I gotta potty really bad."

He, Hardhands, expendable! Can he believe it?

Tiny Doom is ignored but she is also insistent: "Bwannie — get up! Pig wants to go home!"

For a second our hero is wracked with sorrow, he takes a deep breath that judders his bones, and closes his eyes. The darkness is sparked with stars, flares of light caused by the pressure of holding the tears back. But under the surface of his sorrow, he feels an immense longing, longing not

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for the Pontifexa, or hot water, or for Relais's comforting embrace, or even for waffles. Compared to this longing, the rest of his feelings — anger, sorrow, guilt, love — are nothing. He should be already plotting his revenge, his payback, his turn-about-is-fair-play, but instead he is alive with thoughts of sweeping black wings, and spiraling hair, and the unutterable blissful agony of Desire.

"Pig wants a waffle, Bwannie! And I must potty, I gotta potty now!"

Hardhands opens his eyes to a dangly pink snout. Pig's eyes are small black beads, and his cotton stitched mouth is a bit red around the edges, as though he's smeared his lipstick. He smells of salty-iron blood and the peachy whiff of stale coldfire. He looks satisfied.

"Would you please get Pig out of my face?" Hardhands says wearily. The mystery of how Pig fought and defeated a goddess is beyond him right now; he'll consider that later.

Tiny Doom pokes him. She is jiggling and bobbing, with her free hand tightly pressed. She has desires ungratified of her own; her bladder may be full, but her candy sack is empty. "Pig wants you to get up. He says Get Up Now, Banastre!"

Hardhands, thinking of desire gratified, gets up.

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Robert Onopa is a professor in the English department at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. He has been a Fulbright lecturer in Africa, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow, and he taught in New Zealand a few years ago. He has contributed a handful of stories to our pages in the past two decades, including "The Swan," "Name That Moon," and "Geropods." He says he's currently working on a novel set entirely in the confines of Dante's Divine Comedy *and also working on a set of science fiction stories about sports. His latest is science fiction in a classic mode.*

Republic

By Robert Onopa

YOU KNOW OF COURSE WHY we left, and what crews like ours were looking for. I said, *why we left*. I meant, of course, *why we had to leave*. Those years before *The Copernicus* began its passage seem like a dream to me now, the home world a green idyll, the night sky all white moon, the sunrise off the sea on the day we launched oranges and reds, a wild mango sky. Northward the mosquito coast shimmered silver in the rising sun.

I'm sorry. I'm already running on. I'm old now, three times old if you count cryo sleep. There's so much on my mind.

What I'm trying to say is, that day from docking orbit you could see the lower atmosphere smoldering with the first city fires. All through our training years we'd seen the slow, sad, entropic fall of things, rubble where there'd been buildings, a rabble and drum fires on streets where there'd been traffic and order. Less than a year after docking, we left the home system. We never saw what happened, never saw those images you've shown us now on the screen. They'll take some time to absorb.

I'll tell our story as concisely as I can. Captain Hess is dead. I don't

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know how much time we have to talk — we never expected to be in communication again, never really expected to make it back. I'm the linguist who was sent with the mission. You have to hear about what we've seen. There is another world.

Arcturus Wormhole — 56 on the Mauna Kea grid — spun us out in a region so dense with electromagnetic noise that we worried for our instruments. Our primary assignment was to plot the transit of the wormhole across a navigable sun, so we buried ourselves in the work until it was done. Only then did we really look around.

I've ported over all the recon data. You can judge for yourself. You can gauge the planetary masses, the orbits, the size of the star. The system is so like ours that we thought that, after sixty years of travel, we had arrived where we had begun. Our mission scientists were all either nav team or extraction geologists, like Captain Hess. After two days, *Copernicus*'s SciCom decided the objects were mirror worlds, sets of shadow planets, something like that. Hess shrugged and dropped the question. An extraction geologist doesn't care where the minerals come from.

The fourth planet classified as tropical/marine. Its atmosphere? See the data stream, the lower atomic weights? You can imagine our excitement, our exhilaration, when that gas spectrometry came in. It's one of the things we — the first generation crews — were sent out to find. Tropical/marine with breathable atmosphere was the great good place, the golden fleece *The Copernicus* was looking for. Then X-ray spectrometry described parallel chemical and biological processes with Earth.

Yes, *biological*. Now look at the EXO screen.

An intelligent race.

Geophysics had sent ahead an unmanned orbiter to collect data, and when we saw that EXO screen, we realized that a series of rectilinear surface features was a chain of settlements. Two hundred clicks apart, each maybe ten clicks across. Nav was happy, we'd gotten good data on the transit, now planetary geophysics was ringing all its bells. Before we knew it, close probes produced the miracle of a language we could deal with. It was so much more than we'd expected.

I have to tell you right off that it was too much for our EXO to deal

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with, too much for the whole default EXO program to deal with. The original EXO had a stroke and died in cryo, so they gave the job to Lieutenant Grace, the backup shuttle pilot. Like I say, all the rest of our scientists were nav or geo; they would have had even less idea what to do.

Anyway, from orbit we could see that the settlements were socially complex but technologically primitive. Wheel, metals, sanitation, all of it on first glance preelectrical, and first glance had most of it right, except for some process through which they charged their weapons. But they're not savages. They have art, abstract processes.

And that language. From the first, the hard vowels, those inflections...I told myself that since the phonemes were produced by similar cranial structures, the language had to sound that way. But there was the echo of something else, something structural. Have you ever heard of Linear B?

They are very much like us, more like us in some ways than ourselves, Grace liked to say. Not that you would mistake them for human, as you can see from the screen. Thin as rails, articulated trunks. But that fabric that group is swaddled in? All that geometrical body ornamentation?

Initially nav put *The Copernicus* in a parking orbit and we deliberated. Imagine rebreathing your own gasses for sixty years, the three hundred of us squeezed together, recycling fluids, solid wastes. The whole crew was fixated on the oxygen spike in the atmosphere. Adamowski, our Flight Surgeon, could see what was coming. Eventually, he wanted protocols the rest of us couldn't deliver. When Hess organized the first shuttle down, he had already locked himself in quarantine.

By then the marines were on high alert. I didn't like the run-up, the predation vids they immersed themselves in. I remember Sergeant Vrask hunched in her cubicle, submerged in the glow of a bloody hologame, her breath short and damp. It's true there was a lot of warlike activity on the surface. It's true that within hours of landing we saw spilled blood. Rust red, if you please. But they are civilized beings. I'm sure of it. It's in the language.

I was with the first downshuttle. We slid through pink cumulus towers so beautiful that some of us wept. We landed ten clicks from a settlement, on a grassy plain away from dwellings — the far end of a farm, it turned out.

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Perhaps they'd seen us in low orbit. At any rate, we were greeted — they touched their hands to their heads, and bowed, and kept back, then knelt, and touched their hands to their heads and bowed. That's when we saw those geometric patterns for the first time, in their body art, in their fabrics, in their personal effects.

There we stood in our bulky white suits. Our EXO — Lieutenant Grace — was waving through a series of contact gestures programmed by some bloody semioticist back on Earth a century before. Nobody knew what he was doing, not even Grace. You could see him tracking the manual on his helmet monitor. We were all a bit giddy, even Vrask. Captain Hess started laughing. While that was going on, Mercer, the chief scientist, knelt beside an alien, and the two of them started sorting out words with gestures and whispers — ship, sky, rock, hand. You could see Grace's frustration. The Arcturus probes hadn't even hinted at life. Hess had never given him time to train.

EVENTUALLY, a larger group marched up from the settlement, marched in order, its hierarchy transparent. The dozen aliens who had been with us — local farmers, it turned out — touched their foreheads to the soil and scattered. The chiefs among the newcomers were wrapped in red and silver capes, the capes so intricately folded they brought to mind origami. There was also a language in the folds, a hieratic sequence, the same sequence that was conjugated in the rank words they used, a series of inflected long vowels, shifting from a to e, so half the time you thought they were chanting. A slow-moving elder whose cape was the most elaborate was the head of them all. The society was at least as hierarchical as ours — it was in the way they walked, in the way they stood, it was in their silver eyes. The language mirrored it all.

A group of ceremonial guards performed a whirling dance, slicing the air with those long rods, and then they pushed a deer-like animal into a circle. The rods functioned as weapons — they were javelins, swords, Kendo *shinai*, all in one. They slaughtered the animal. Our first sight of blood. It was a ritual act, so we tried not to draw conclusions. Still, I don't think we were prepared for the violence or for the sound of the animal's cry. As it died it sounded human.

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Anyway, the rods. Their grips were so finely worked with that intricate geometry they seemed like jewelry, though what they were were personalized weapons. The aliens always had theirs at hand, used them in ceremonies, even charged them electrically in a way we never quite understood.

Hess kept his distance. The marines made the first real contact, even while they respected basic quarantine. I mean they were the first to make any sort of connection, a kind of bonding. After a day we sent the bulky EVA suits back up orbit and traded them for hermetic jumps and light breathing helmets. The aliens were always nearby, and the marines were obsessed with them from the first deer. The marines showed up each dusk when the ritual animal was released. They tracked its run, they tracked the aliens' every move in pursuit, focused on the white knives with the same rapture you saw reflected in their eyes in the hologames. In just a day a camaraderie developed between them and the hunters, and they gestured in admiration narrating how the deer was brought down. They compared weapons, handled the rods as best they could while keeping quarantine with the breathing helmets and jumps. You could see them awkwardly stepping and swinging through the basic moves, as if they were learning a dance, a physical language.

After three days — *The Copernicus* in orbit, the lander and the cargo sled shuttling down to a base they'd laid out for us, quarantine holding — we were invited into the city. At midday we were led in a procession through narrow streets and stone buildings and across squat bridges over a series of canals and waterworks that ringed the city center. We finally reached an eight-sided plaza acres across at the river, at a fortified stone bank. A temple dominated the land side. We'd seen the river from orbit. It was so wide that from where we stood we couldn't see its opposite bank. The site had been developed with defense in mind: the temple was protected by the rainbow of canals at its back, and by the fortified stone bank along the river at its front.

We were so caught up in the alien architecture, the strange symbols, the high narrow doors, that most of us missed the obvious, missed what was happening with Hess, what *had been* happening with Hess. From the first the aliens had been deferential to him in the extreme; I wondered if

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I was misreading language from an unfamiliar body. But that afternoon, when we entered the city, the children ran ahead and paved the street with broad leaves for Hess to walk on. Several thousand aliens came out of their dwellings and chanted as he passed. They kept their distance and bowed, touched their foreheads to the soil.

The reality only became clear to me as I watched them bestow a cape on Hess's shoulders in the eight-sided plaza. They wouldn't look directly into his eyes. The cape was blue and gold, but it otherwise matched the folds of a cape on a statue to one side of the temple door.

They had decided that Hess was something like a god.

The tall alien we had seen earlier made a speech from the foot of the central stairs of the temple, which the crew asked me to translate, so I made my guesses and said welcome, god from the sky. Hess still didn't quite get it. He asked me, *How much longer?* I told him he had to respond, and he just looked at me, annoyed and confused. It was an awkward moment.

That's when Grace stepped forward, reached around behind his neck and pulled off his breathing helmet.

So he was the one who broke our promise to Adamowski. Grace waved his arms in a wide circle, raised them to the sky and took a deep breath. The rest of us were transfixed at the breaking of quarantine.

Before anybody could stop him Grace stepped out of his jumps and started chanting a greeting he'd composed. You could tell he'd poured himself into it, thought it out as best he could, and rehearsed. He had their vocal range, for what it was worth, and his hand movements were a semiotic catalogue of compliance and interest. He knew Hess didn't quite get what was going on. Grace was trying to negotiate contact.

At what turned into the end of his performance, he touched the tall alien in the yellow and red cape, just touched him. Understand that that same alien had put his hands on Grace before he'd pulled his helmet off. He'd touched his suit, his faceplate, his gloved hand.

But when Grace touched him, the ceremonial guard surged forward. Grace was challenged with a weapon, one of those rods, but this one crackled with energy. Grace fell back with a burn on his shoulder.

The tall alien apparently was something like a god, too.

Grace pushed himself up, bent with pain. In slow motion, head

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lowered, hands open, he moved through a vocabulary of conciliatory body language. I thought he might be killed until Hess stepped forward. Hess had this flat, firm voice, and he gave a long speech about misunderstanding protocol as if he was lecturing to lab assistants. His confidence was a wonder — he still didn't know what was going on but to the aliens, anyway, he acted like a god. That's why we survived. We were all of us anxious from the bloody show we'd been seeing with the deer. That day it seemed like every hour you could hear one cry.

In the meantime, Vrask had moved to one side and slipped out of her helmet too, to protect Grace, I guess. You could hear her breathing hard. When she peeled off her jumps she was strapped with weapons, and the weapons distracted the ceremonial guard while Hess was speaking. By then Vrask's troops were shedding helmets and suits, too. And then when I looked, of all things, Vrask begins showing an alien her weapon, turning it in her hands, clearing its chamber, offering its stock to an alien elder. In a blink, the aliens visibly relaxed, and the marines were smiling, and they were comparing weapons with the aliens again, now the other way around. The tension dissolved between them, or maybe it was never there for the leaders to exploit. That's why I used the word "bonding."

Captain Hess read into the log that we "shook it off" once we were all of us out of our suits. The air smelled sharp and fresh, like cut grass — it was wonderful to take off that breathing helmet. But I didn't know what to think.

The next day they presented me with the Codexes I've holocopied in the Appendix.

I've been working on them ever since. There are structural echoes of an ancient script, one of our protolanguages...I could be wrong. Remember that Linear B I mentioned? There were so many echoes it seemed to me hallucinatory, like living out a parable or a dream. How to account for it? Earlier contact? Coincidence?

Copernicus/SciCom was no help. When they could be dragged away from either nav data or mineral samples they only shrugged. It wasn't clear if the way Hess was treated rubbed off on the rest of us. I've never really been able to translate the language — there's another level of coding in it, I'm certain. There was a lot of confusion that week. I suppose there still is.

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* * *

Ten days after we had first touched down, the aliens declared a citywide holiday in our honor. Their voices naturally produced an overtone, so their singing was particularly alien, aggressive and sad at once. We sat with them, tried their words, handled their tools, played with their pets. They taught our marines an exercise with the rods, then challenged them to ritual sports. Aside from the rods, they threw copper-like stars with sharpened points well enough to bring down a deer at thirty meters. Vrask and her people showed off their own skills, hand to hand stuff, target work with those compound crossbows they train with. The aliens loved the handheld hologames. They loved them. The remains of any shadow seemed to lift and we stopped thinking about the business with Grace. By then most of the crew got a turn downplanet, even the hydroponics team. In the end there was a dance. Those tubes are musical instruments, that moving line a dance. Can you see how it replicates the figure on the elder's cape? To tell you the truth, it felt wonderful to move in a natural gravity. Just being alive seemed a wonder.

I suppose SciCom had it right. The aliens thought of us as emissaries of one of their sky gods, his name all long vowels. The god, in person, they figured was Hess. Hess just grinned and took mineral samples. He ate the food. He was afraid of nothing. The only one who never broke quarantine was Adamowski. For all those weeks when the rest of us downplanet were feasting and basking in our kinship with a god, he was up there, locked in containment.

Grace was desperate to redeem himself. That's why he took them for trips in the cargo sled. That's why he showed them how the shuttle worked, how you could run anything, really, with just a keypad controller from the hologames and the right codes.

I'll try to stick to the main things, to what happened. It's just that certain details seem preternaturally clear now — the human cry of the deer, the aliens' four-fingered hands, strong enough to crush a man's windpipe, their children's wooden toys, which seemed so human. Hess showed me a mineral once that changed color when he shattered it, exposed it to atmosphere, rainbow sand running through his fingers.

And I remember those pink clouds and the blue of the sky. Have you

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ever seen a robin's egg? When I looked up I squinted and I thought I saw heaven. But some nights I would look up and see only strange stars in alien constellations and I would feel lost beyond any recovering.

Have I told you what they did with the blood? About the ritual at the cave? To mark the end of their training, their ceremonial guards are taken, blindfolded, at night, to the scene of a fresh battle at the edge of their territory. That's how the planet's organized — one self-sufficient city against the next, shifting alliances, constant low-level war on their perimeters. In torchlight, the initiates kneel, cup their hand against a fresh wound. Then they are told to bring their hands to their mouth and drink the blood.

Did I tell you our marines were invited along? That some of the marines drank the blood as well? Some of them had reactions, but the others...I think it kept them from being sick later. I believe they were being recruited. You know some of them stayed. The fresh battle to which they'd gone was a smoldering fire. The planet was already destabilizing, the news of our arrival spreading like the rosy light of the sun. And now we were part of it, the marines, their weapons, even Grace was part of it, with the business in the cave.

That's where he was killed, three days after the first blood ceremony.

We were never really sure who killed Grace. Captain Hess withdrew all but a skeleton crew up to *The Copernicus*. We reviewed our data, took inventory of our samples — geologists, planetary engineers, people like me. It was possible that Grace could have been killed by one of our own. He'd been strangled. Hess decided that we should ship back home.

We held a service for Grace and a ritual farewell with the aliens, who gave us no answers about Grace. We were happy enough to leave.

We hit our mark to the wormhole, initiated cryo sequence, and out of nowhere, our primary engine fell apart on us. The core blew out our water, blew out a side of tanks. You know how little water we carry, how we just loop it around. Well, if you lose half your holding tanks, you have a problem.

We had to return to the surface of the fourth planet to resupply. We jury rigged the cargo sled with a backup tank from hydroponics and used the lander for logistics.

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* * *

There was no welcoming committee this time. Even the farmers kept their distance.

We established a site beside a lake three clicks from our original base. There was trouble. First tools started to go missing, then materials, starting with pipe at the shoreline. Gloves, boots, then a rebreather. When Hess complained, one of the silver-and-red-caped elders gave him a sharp lecture I'd finally gotten familiar enough with the language to translate: we were taking something of theirs, their water. They had the right to take something in return.

I told you the planet was tropical/marine. It was awash. Still, in their language, the word for water was the word for life.

As the crew was squaring away the sled after topping off, the aliens decoupled the tank from the cargo sled's cab, the cab with the power unit, and three of them took the cab and lurched off across the lake.

Hess had been uporbit. He was livid. He dressed in his ceremonial blues and went down with the marines in full gear. The farmers led him up the shoreline on a false trail for three hours — it was a total waste of time, they'd convinced him to go on foot, it had turned hot, and he was tinder. He marched the squad through the stone buildings and into the square between the temple and the fortified bank, followed by a crowd. He made for the residence beside the temple.

His idea was to take an alien as hostage for the cargo sled's cab.

But the instant Captain Hess raised his arm to seize the elder, a guard ghosted up from behind and made a sharp, sideways move with his rod that made Hess's head snap forward. Weapons went off.... It was a real mess.

We took on the rest of the water under fire. Seven marines deserted, hooked up with the aliens who had hijacked the cab. We had it in mind to forcibly extract them but we had to leave when we realized that weapons had been pilfered along with the cab and that they were being trained on *The Copernicus*.

We set course for home.

Adamowski had been right all along. Downplanet crew started turning up sick immediately. Adamowski guessed disease was wiping out the aliens, too. Even before we left parking orbit, the great elder was dead,

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though with the sled's weapons and the deserted marines for a time his group must have ruled the planet.

We saw the evidence that the marines and weapons had been a tipping point on our way out of the system; in the year it took us, we could see a transformation in the pattern of settlements, a consolidation, then what might have been a collapse.

Most of the crew died in that year before reinsertion.

If our journey out seems a dream, our journey back, those years on *The Copernicus*, seem dark sleep itself, dreamless sleep, the black night of cryo and faint stars as we crawled through the wormhole.

Adamowski died tending to the sick. That's why there are only eighteen of us left, that's why there are so few survivors listed on the manifest.

IT WAS A PLEASURE to talk with you yesterday. You're breaking up today as well. Of course it's a shame to have come so close, only to be made so certain that we could never land. You will forgive my attack of nostalgia — *nostos*, from the Greek, for home; *algia*, also from the Greek, for pain. Pain for home. We understand that there's no choice but for you to apply a strict quarantine. We understand the potential for severe measures if we approach. You will appreciate the irony. We came back willing to make do with what might be left, and we were worried that it might not be safe to land. Now that Earth is restored, a garden where there had been a smoldering wasteland, Earth has become the very place we can never land. Once we thought we were the lucky ones.

When we signed on with *The Copernicus*, we thought the trip would be the adventure of our lives. Now we know the trip *was* our lives.

Is our lives.

That's why the eighteen of us are turning *The Copernicus* back.

We've reinstalled and updated the original program. We still have plenty of reactor time to power the drive. We want to see those pink clouds again. We want to die off the ship. We're curious about what happened to Vrask and the six other marines. They didn't get sick, as maybe you've realized, because they're the ones who went through the alien initiation, they're the ones who drank the blood.

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Have you also asked yourself why the eighteen of us survived? Why if all the other members of the crew died of disease, why we're still alive? I'm guessing that you have.

Yes, to be perfectly frank, yes, all eighteen of us drank the blood as well. I apologize for not telling you in the first place. We brought alien blood to our lips just after Grace had been killed. The communion transformed us. When we were forced to go back for the water, when the fighting started, when the rods began humming and they pulled the white knives from their sheathes, we could kill with an energy and indifference none of us had ever felt before. Maybe we're a little less human for that, but it kept us alive, you know, seemed like a vaccine against death itself. Maybe it means we belong to the place. And so we'll go back. There are still things hidden in the language to me and I'm curious to understand just what we've done.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

SUPERCALIFRAGILISTICNANNY911

ALTHOUGH we clearly would wish otherwise, there is nothing particularly magical about child-rearing (or any other form of caregiving). It just takes common sense, love, compassion, infinite patience, and lots and lots (and lots) of time and attention. Money helps, but is much less important than many Americans think. With kids, the ability to be tough as well as tender ("setting limits," creating discipline and structure) is also crucial — and is much *more* important than many Americans think.

With all due props to the Peace Corps, it is parenting that deserves the motto of "The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love." Not everyone with the power to reproduce is actually capable of doing the toughest job, however. Which explains a lot in human society.

Most folks do a passable job, but fear they're not even coming close. They are exhausted, stressed, and fear that their lives as well as their children are Completely Out of Control. Which might explain a lot about the considerable power of the magical nanny as a cultural motif.

Someone with a tenure-track position and more time for research could probably trace the potency of this fantasy figure all the way back to ancient Egypt. Personally, I wasn't aware of it before the mid-twentieth century when, during a one-year period between 1964 and 1965, young Julie Andrews helped to personify the myth in ways that have been copied ever since.

The 1965 film in question was *The Sound of Music*. No fantasy elements here, just plenty of Rodgers and Hammerstein songs. For the real magic, you must look

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to Ms. Andrews's earlier film, the Disney musical/live action/animation classic, *Mary Poppins*.

Based on the children's book series by P. L. Travers, *Mary Poppins* told a story of Edwardian London that was designed, by Disney, to speak directly to American audiences. And it did — and does today.

Two adorable but mischievous siblings, Jane (Karen Dotrice) and Michael (Matthew Garber) Banks, have driven off numerous nannies — a recurrent theme in such stories. They are largely ignored by their middle-management banker father, George (David Tomlinson), and their flighty suffragist mother, Winifred (Glynis Johns). Then, just when she is needed most, a capable young woman literally blows into the household, descending on the east wind, with her no-nonsense yet fun loving approach to child-minding.

With Mary Poppins around, play rooms magically clean themselves up in the time it takes to sing a song. The children dance on rooftops, and escape into brightly colored cartoon worlds where penguins serve tea and carousel horses can break free and win steeplechase races. Overtly didactic content is kept to a minimum in *Mary Poppins*, which is why it does such a good job of enchanting children. Oh, the kiddies learn to appreciate how hard old Dad has it, while old Dad realizes that he needs to pay more attention to the kiddies and kick back a bit, so there are a few morals to the story. As to what Mom learns — presumably it's to abandon her political work and to realize that the only thing a "Votes for Women" sash is good for is to make a tail for a mended kite.

Family united, it's time for the "practically perfect" Miss Poppins to open up her brolly and fly away again, without a single teary goodbye or even a twinge of separation anxiety.

Since *Mary Poppins*, the character of the eccentric caregiver who swoops in and heals the family has been recurrent and influential. Disney (as has always been their wont) has attempted to copy their own success — as in the witch-in-training surrogate mom played by Angela Lansbury in Disney's 1971 musical fantasy, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*.

Although there have occasionally been examples of caregiver tales that clearly qualify as science fiction (like the NBC "Project Peacock" production of Ray Bradbury's *The Electric Grandmother*), most incarnations of the healing hand of

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the nanny were far from realistic, and yet contained little to no real fantasy elements.

On the big screen, the British nanny has been blown away by distinctly American varieties. In dramatic (and some might say, stereotypical) mode, Whoopi Goldberg has played several hired nurturers in films like *Clara's Heart* (1988) and *Corrina, Corrina* (1994). And there have been scary nannies like psycho Rebecca De Mornay in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992) and the terrifying-in-a-much-different-way drunken flibbertigibbet played by Brittany Murphy in *Uptown Girls* (2003), too.

If American women have generally failed to catch on in such roles, the macho and man-in-drag childminder story has flourished in the last fifteen years. Such films include *Mr. Nanny* (1993), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *The Pacifier* (2005), and 2006's *Big Momma's House 2*. No fantasy here, of course, except for the idea that Hulk Hogan can act, or that anyone would mistake Robin Williams or Martin Lawrence for a woman.

On TV, a few were direct descendents of Mary Poppins, like the mysterious yet perkily British caregiver in *Nanny and the Professor*. But most shows simply tried to add a twist to *The Sound of Music* hired-help-to-real-stepparent story. These include everything from Tony Danza's palooka nanny of *Who's the Boss* to the culture clash of Fran Drescher's Flushing-born *The Nanny* bringing joy to a snooty British theatrical producer and his brood.

All the pointless variations and spins are enough to make you want to slap the fortieth anniversary disc of *Mary Poppins* back in the old DVD player to see the real thing again. And for those who'd like to see a new yet classic tale of an enchanted kiddie caretaker with a distinctly British flavor, I can also recommend the retro charms of *Nanny McPhee*.

Emma Thompson worked for five years to adapt for the screen the Nurse Matilda stories of Christianna Brand (best known as a suspense writer for mysteries like *Green for Danger*). Brand claimed that her Nurse Matilda tales were based on stories she was told by her grandfather as a child. The stories revolve around a large chaotic family of countless children who enjoy terrorizing their pets and servants, as well as assorted village people, doing "simply dreadful things" of a quite imaginative nature.

Brand believed that children

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had too few opportunities to be truly "naughty," and would enjoy reading the adventures of other children who clearly are. It would seem that she was right, as her Edwardian tales of the devilish Brown children first started appearing in the early 1960s and have been regularly reprinted since.

Brand was far from an anarchist, however. So her episodic (yet light on real plot) stories didn't just relate the wicked adventures of the Brown younguns. They also detailed the taming of the numerous imps by a crone-like nanny who conjured up amazing powers with the rap of her walking stick.

Thompson, who cast herself in the role of the homely witch with the heart of gold, did an admirable job of establishing a clear-cut storyline while maintaining the charm of the original stories. And although I hate the Disneyesque cliché of making every child a motherless tyke, I must admit that the cliché works here.

One thing that bothered me about the Nurse Matilda stories is how incredibly bad the Brown children are and how completely oblivious both of their parents were to their outrageous behavior. Mama and Papa appear both lazy and clueless throughout. And although I might be inclined to characterize many modern parents in that way, it always seemed wrong for a seemingly devoted and intact set of parents from a long-ago and more rigid and manner-bound time to be that completely unaware and indulgent.

Thompson gets around this sticking point nicely. The mother of the clan has recently died (of exhaustion, no doubt), while the amiable father (played by Colin Firth) is distracted by grief and money worries into neglecting his children. In this situation, what child wouldn't act out? The Brown children do so, with fiendish imagination.

As per every enchanted nanny tale that ever was, the children have previously driven off nanny after nanny. Seventeen is the current count, with the latest scared away by a seeming act of familial cannibalism. Just when dear Dad is at his wit's end to find another caregiver while he deals with the demand from Great Aunt Adelaide (*Bedknobs and Broomsticks*'s Angela Lansbury, practically unrecognizable in hooked putty nose) that he must marry within the month or lose her desperately needed financial support, a snaggle-toothed hag appears at the door. She is Nanny McPhee, there to take charge of the

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children, who are presently destroying the kitchen and terrorizing the cook.

Nanny McPhee is neither pretty nor perky. She doesn't sing, dance, or sweep the children off to fantasyland. Thompson has said that there is a kind of zen quality to her, and that seems about right. She is calm and quiet, and the "lessons" she teaches her charges come in the form of bewitched reverse psychology. When the children misbehave, Nanny (with a thunderous rap of her stick) compels the children to continue their bad behavior to a logically frightening or uncomfortable level that makes them want to change their ways — and say please and thank you, to boot.

Before long the children are accepting the consequences for their actions and settling down to a more normal level of mischief, which still includes serving up worm sandwiches to the day-glo Bo-Peep harridan (Celia Imrie) who means to be their evil stepmother.

Nanny McPhee is not a flawless film. A wide variety of colorful support characters (like Mr. Brown's mortuary co-workers, played by Derek Jacobi and Patrick Barlow) are introduced, and then given nothing much to do. And speaking of that mortuary, I couldn't quite figure out what Thompson had in mind giving the children's poppa that particular profession. But since she did so, I kept expecting her to tie the plot to his grim job. She never did. It was completely inconsequential. (That had me wondering what, say, Tim Burton would have done with that setup. He wouldn't have ignored it, of that I feel certain!)

I would guess that *Nanny McPhee* will be too old-fashioned and wholesome for the taste of many modern viewers, young and old. The special effects are few and far between and consist of benignly silly hijinks like a donkey dancing on two legs and mimicking a young girl. Still, director Kirk Jones *(Waking Ned Devine)* keeps thing moving, without losing focus on his characters. The acting, by a British cast, is — as you would expect — first rate. And the production design of Michael Howells is delightfully offkilter, as befits this cheerily fantastical family film.

Although not meant to be an imitator of *Mary Poppins*, *Nanny McPhee* is a comfortable and charming film in the same tradition. A few raps of a stick can't, it goes without saying, heal the broken hearts of motherless children, or make them behave better. That's

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fantasy, to be sure. But I must say that it is, at least, honest fantasy.

Less honest are the latest descendants of *Mary Poppins*. They can be found on two "reality" television shows called *Supernanny* (ABC) and *Nanny 911* (Fox). The websites for the shows come right out and call each female star a "modern-day Mary Poppins." All are British and carry props like umbrellas and carpetbags if the comparisons aren't obvious enough for you.

In each show, a nanny swoops into a home with frazzled gutless parents and raging (biting, kicking, foul-mouthed) children. A week of scolding tough love for both parents and children and the family dynamic is presto-chango healed. Pixie dust is evidently not needed, just a judicious application of editing and a hasty exit before it all falls apart.

This is a different kind of mythology — one that glorifies and perpetuates the popular American delusion of the Quick Fix. These shows are fantasy, too. But unlike *Mary Poppins* and *Nanny McPhee*, they're hoping they can make the viewer believe otherwise.

"My client is a zombie, Mr. Davis. He's not intimidated by threats of mind-numbing protracted litigation."

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Jerry Seeger says he spent his adult life as a software engineer. But after creating educational software for fifteen years, he retired both from software and from being an adult. The resulting kid sold his house and hit the road. These days he can usually be found in a café in Prague. When he's not working on a novel or designing his own word processing program, he blogs on the proper way to fry eggs. This story (his first published work of fiction) is a stylish bit of intergalactic intrigue.

Memory of a Thing that Never Was

By Jerry Seeger

The End

IT'S EASY, FROM THIS DISTANCE of time, safely protected by the years, to look back on those days with fondness. The scars have faded; they are hardly noticeable anymore unless you look for them. I even shave sometimes now, and I don't have to worry about people staring. Still, most of the time I wear a beard. Old habits die hard.

The scars, faded to almost nothing, are the only evidence left that anything happened at all. Fickle memory, merciful in its selectivity, no longer haunts me; I no longer see the faces of my friends when I look at strangers. Even the dreams have stopped, almost. Each day I walk down to the café, sit at my little table on the sidewalk, read my paper and drink my coffee. It is a small life, lacking any significance or ambition. It does not crave excitement or fulfillment. It is enough for me, now.

Meeting I

"May I join you?"

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I looked up from my newspaper in surprise to see an older man standing by my table. I took him in with a well-trained glance — tallish, slender, dark suit, long coat, black umbrella, black leather gloves, a neatly folded copy of *Le Monde* tucked under his arm. The enemy. So intent had I been in my search for evidence any of them might yet be alive, he had been able to walk right up to me. I didn't have a gun. The Other did, I was sure. "Sure, pull up a seat," I said. I gathered my *New York Times*, now irrelevant, and folded it neatly.

"Thank you." He pulled a chair over from the next table and I moved a bit so he could sit next to me, with his back to the café window, watching the traffic.

Bernard emerged from the café and hesitated for a moment. I had never had company at my table before. "*Vin rouge*," my guest ordered. Bernard retreated.

"My name is...Smith." He had debated telling me his real name, but decided against it. It didn't matter; I wouldn't have been able to pronounce it anyway. "How long have you been coming here?" Smith asked.

"A few years, I guess. My name's Nash."

Smith nodded. "I thought so. We accounted for all the rest."

"I thought we got all of you."

Smith looked at my newspaper. "But you weren't sure."

"No."

We watched from under the awning as people hurried past in the light rain. We were the only two who had chosen to occupy a table outside on such a dreary day; the other café patrons were crowded within, sharing warmth and oxygen, but when I arrived that morning the *réservé* sign was perched with precision atop the two-day-old newspaper, as it had been every day for the past six years. They understood, here.

A truck rumbled up the street, over the cobblestones, leaving behind the scent of diesel. "There were no survivors," Smith said, "on either side."

The Beginning

When telling a story it is traditional, I suppose, to start at the beginning. I do not know when the war began, perhaps a week before I

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answered the help wanted ad in the *Times* classifieds, perhaps a thousand years. I can only begin where the story begins for me, with my Honorable Discharge from the military. I had done well there, but somewhere along the way I was branded "not a team player" — an entirely fair assessment. After ten years of service which included several awards, medals, and other worthless trinkets, the military and I had had enough of each other. A handshake, a slap on the back, and I was a civilian.

Back then I was even less well-equipped to be a civilian than I was to be a soldier. I tried a few odd jobs — security guard, bouncer, and the like — and washed out of the police academy for many of the same reasons I was not in the military anymore. Not a team player. Attitude problem, they called it when they didn't have to write it down.

The ad had my name on it. Not literally, of course, but it might as well have. It might even have been written especially for me to read. The ad carried the logo of the FBI and was looking for ex-military with specialized skills and the ability to work independently, with little or no supervision. Pension calculated based on date first joined the military. Equal opportunity employer, and so on. I called the number, gave my name, was given a time to appear for the interview.

"Can we make it earlier? I have to work then." Work, if I recall correctly, was on a construction site.

"No." The woman's voice was cold and firm.

"How about later?"

"No." I imagined her pay was docked for each word she spoke.

"Well, I guess I'll have to quit my job then, to come to your friggin' interview."

"All right," she said, unaffected by my anger. She gave the address once and cut the connection. I looked at the ad again. It looked promising, but already they were giving me the runaround.

Of course, I did quit my job, and I did go to the interview. The building was a nondescript and soulless office building on the outskirts of downtown, and there was no indication that the FBI was anywhere inside. I found the appropriate suite on the fifth floor and gave my name to the receptionist. "Please be seated," was all she said.

I sat on a vinyl-clad couch that looked like it had been salvaged from the 1970s. On the wall behind my head was a poster proclaiming the

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virtues of patience. On the wall facing me its sibling showed a dramatic photo of a whale breaching, and in fancy script beneath explained that success went to those who dared to break barriers. On a low table in front of me were well-worn financial magazines from last month and today's *Times*. At each end of the couch potted palm trees concealed security cameras, in addition to those in the ceiling. I occupied my time pretending to thumb through *Forbes* while spotting the cameras I wasn't supposed to be able to find. While doing that I listened to the activity of the receptionist. She moved with ruthless efficiency and spoke on the phone with the same economy of words as the woman I had first called, but her voice was not the same.

Her phone purred softly. She picked up the receiver, said nothing and set it down again. "Through that door," she said in my direction, then returned to her other duties. I stood, opened the only other door I was supposed to know about, and found myself in a long hallway with closed doors on either side. More runaround. I walked down the middle of the hall, waiting for someone to stop me. If no one did, I'd just turn around and go home. It was spring; there were more construction jobs out there.

Near the end of the hall one of the doors was partially open, and as I approached a voice came from within, "Come in, Mr. Nash." The voice was dusty and stained by cigarettes.

I pushed open the door and took one step inside. The office was small and gray, washed of color by the dingy light coming through the window. A small man, withered and even grayer, stood up behind his desk as I entered. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Nash. My name is Cain." He offered his hand. His skin was dry and cold. I wasn't sure if Cain was his first or last name, or perhaps just a name he found convenient for the occasion. "Please have a seat." I did as I was told, taking in the room as I stepped forward. Nothing on the desk but a simple gooseneck lamp, which was not turned on. Not even plugged in, I saw. The bookshelf had only a few dusty volumes, the chalkboard had never been used. I could not see any cameras. I parked on the hard wooden chair in front of the desk. Cain's battered office chair squeaked loudly as he sat also.

He picked up a piece of paper and pretended to read it for a moment. "Why did you use the stairs when you came up here?"

Not the way I expected the interview to start. "I like to stay in shape,"

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I said. I did not mention that as I approached the elevator there had been two men I did not like the look of. I was in a nice office building, not the sort of place you would expect trouble, but an elevator is no place to discover that you have been too trusting of your fellow man.

"I see. And you knew the door on this floor would be locked on the stairwell side?"

"Most are, these days, but I worked making deliveries for a while. If you knock, generally someone will open the door for you."

"And if no one did?"

I decided to take a chance. Either they wanted me for my skills, or I didn't belong. "That was not a challenging lock."

Cain nodded with satisfaction. "The men at the elevator were in my employ. What would you have done if I'd had men on the stairs as well?"

"Gone home."

"You would give up so easily?"

"You have to weigh the objective against the risk."

"You find this objective to be that unimportant?"

"Hell, it's a *job*, right? Not even a job, an interview. I've got no problem with risk, but not just for a shot at a paycheck."

"What would you take a risk for?"

"For my country, for my mission, for the people reporting to me, and for the people I report to. In that order."

"You've thought about that before."

"Yes."

"You missed the camera in the table leg, but you got the one in the receptionist's barrette. That was good. What can you tell me about European market forces?"

"I spent most of my time on Yet Another Article About The Price of Silver."

"What is the receptionist's name?"

"Rachel." There had been no indication of her name anywhere in the office, but I take care of my body, ears included. I had heard her name over the line when she answered her phone.

"How many toes do I have?"

"If I had to guess, I'd go with ten." I hesitated and added, "But since you asked, that reduces my confidence."

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"Is there anything important to you in your apartment?"

"No."

"All right then. There are a couple of formalities, and then I can give you a full briefing."

"I have a question first."

"I will answer if I can."

"When did you decide to hire me?"

Cain smiled, the deep creases casting shadows in his colorless face. "When you said 'I have a question first.'"

Meeting II

Other. What a simple name for them. Back then, I wondered what they called us. It had seemed important while we danced with knives at each other's throats. Now it was only with effort that I could remember what we had called ourselves. Special Defense Force. A meaningless name made even less significant when reduced to initials: SDF. By the end of our little war only the initials made any sense at all; none of the words in the name applied any longer. We were not a force, not defensive, and most certainly not special.

Smith's wine arrived; he sipped it tentatively and nodded. "The benefits of civilization," he said, setting down his glass.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"You don't remember? To enslave your race." He chuckled and shook his head sadly.

"Not that. How did you find me?"

"You found *me*."

I shot the Other a skeptical glance. "I was just sitting here."

"They say that there are certain places in the world where, if you stay still long enough, you will see everyone. You taught us that much of hunting is remaining still, Mr. Nash, and you have been staying still a very long time."

"I'm just too tired to move."

Smith sighed. "Yes. I am weary also. Enslaving your race will have to wait for another day."

* * *

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INTRODUCTION

I will, as they say, dispense with the formalities. In this case Cain's "formalities" were intrusive and uncomfortable, as they searched for any physical weakness or dependency that would undermine my ability to perform. The physical probing was followed by a series of tests and interviews designed to find similar flaws in my mind. I put up with the transparent questions, and even managed not to tell the practitioners what I really thought of them. Everything you need to know about my head is in my record. Efficient. Skilled. Not a team player.

These shrinks are the same guys who were sticking leeches on people to cure their diseases only two hundred years ago. They don't understand the brain, so they have invented a "mind" that lives inside it, like the bad humors in one's blood that caused disease. A decent carnival fortune teller could do better than these guys. It's too bad, in retrospect, that they didn't hire one. But that wouldn't have been Scientific.

And so I came out the other end of this series of indignities intact and employed. That evening I was on a plane, bound for Colorado, and all I knew was that I did not work for the FBI. I had not received the promised debriefing. More runaround. I'll admit it, though, I was curious and not just a little proud that I was to be part of something so secret and elite.

I flipped through the newspaper Cain had given me. "Most of it is rubbish," he had said. "But mixed in with the rubbish are things that only look like rubbish, but are in fact important pieces of information disguised as rubbish. Look for larger patterns, things not said as well as what is said. Those are the things we will use to track the enemy."

"That seems pretty subjective."

"For the inexperienced, it is. Once you have had training and practice, you will see their motions clearly. These are the clues that will lead you to them, and they are the sorts of clues you must do your best not to leave about your own movements. You will not communicate with your team in any conventional manner; the enemy will intercept and decipher anything we have the technology to send."

"Who are they? Israelis? Japanese? The Russians can't match our stuff."

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"You will learn more when you are in a more secure place. Good-bye, Mr. Nash. It is likely we will not meet again until the battle is concluded." He was wrong about that, of course.

Meeting III

The rain started falling harder. People rushed past, huddled under umbrellas, eyes cast downward. "Things have changed since you first got here," I said.

"Yes. You still have the power of self-extinction, but you have forgotten the fear. Rather, your fear has been diverted to smaller things."

Illumination

There comes a time in any story when the truth is revealed.

"Oh, for crap's sake," I said.

Commander Hightower was watching my eyes intently. "Skeptic" was probably in my record somewhere, and he knew damn good and well that I was not going to swallow any kind of little-green-men malarkey. I was disappointed. The training had been the most intense — and the most fun — I had ever recieved, and I could feel my skills increase every day, every hour. There was little they could teach me about combat; in fact, I was often teaching others those skills. However, that was only a small part of the curriculum and in many ways the least important.

We learned how to get where we didn't belong. We learned computers — not computers like they have today, nothing close, but at the time we were on the cutting edge of what is now called "cracking." Above all, we learned to analyze a cloud of data and find the one relevant fact. Needles in haystacks became child's play for us.

We. Us. There were four of us training together. Otis, Roger, Darryl, and me. No last names. Otis in particular could skim over a pile of information and come up with the unexpected. As time went on, he grew pensive.

"What's up?" I asked him one afternoon as we were walking to the mess hall.

"Something's wrong," he said. "There's a hole."

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Now that he mentioned it, I knew just what he meant. "Our objective."

"Search and destroy, certainly, but who is the enemy?"

"And why have we not been taught anything about recent technology?" I agreed. "I've heard about some pretty amazing stuff."

Perhaps it was the question planted by Otis, but I hesitated before I dismissed what Hightower told me. We had been taught to assimilate disparate information and draw conclusions, and to trust our instincts. Now I stood, and knew why Otis had been so disturbed. He had already known. And now the little green men were here, and I was supposed to stop them.

Hightower relaxed. "That went better than I expected," he said.

"I should have figured it out already."

"It's a big jump."

"Otis got it, didn't he?"

"That guy spooks me. I think he can see about five minutes into the future." We shared a chuckle of admiration, then the commander spoke again. "Right now he is our most valuable asset. You'll be watching his back, and when he digs something up, you'll act on it."

"What if I can't do both?"

"That will be entirely your call. You once said you were loyal to country, mission, subordinates, and superiors, in that order, and you have demonstrated that you understand that all are intertwined. You can weigh relative risks against the larger objective. That is why you are here."

"Not my devilish good looks?"

"Ah, no."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Hightower put his hand on my shoulder. "I know you will." It felt like good-bye.

And off I went to fight the Others, Otis at my side.

Suspicion

"Someone's selling us out," Otis said, reading the report of Darryl's death. Our comrades were falling one by one. "Darryl was almost as paranoid as you are."

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"Maybe he was on a hunt." That was the time of greatest risk, when an agent would have to move, creating ripples the Others could use to track him.

"Maybe." Otis didn't sound convinced.

Meeting IV

The little finger of each of Smith's gloves was curled inward somewhat and did not move. There was no finger inside. They had convincing prosthetics, but obviously Smith didn't feel the need to bother anymore. Eight fingers, eight toes, eyes that could not see red. To them, we all bled black.

"We knew, when we came here, that there would be no going back. It will be many years, yet, before those back home learn what became of us, that proud group of colonists, carrying the beacon of civilization to another backward race."

I had another coffee, Smith another wine. "It doesn't affect me as much as it does you," he said, "but it still produces a pleasant sensation."

"Do you have wine, where you come from?"

"No. We have something much like yeast, so we have alcohol." He smiled. "I don't think intelligent life could exist without it. But we don't have wine." He swirled the deep red liquid in his glass, looking through it at the gray street beyond, the bloody image reversed. I wondered what he saw. He smiled wistfully. "It makes living here possible."

Possible, not bearable. He finished his wine quickly and had another. "I'm glad you found me," he said. "There's no one else on this planet who understands. We are warriors, but we shall not have the honor to fall to a worthy adversary. We will simply be forgotten, soldiers in a war that never happened."

Knowledge

"Uh, oh," Otis whispered. Something in his voice caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand up. I looked up from cleaning my Browning; he was staring woodenly ahead, his face gray, the newspaper in front of him forgotten.

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"What is it?" I asked.

I don't think he heard me. He put his hands up to his eyes and slumped forward, letting out his breath heavily. "Oh, man, oh, man," he moaned. "Shoulda seen it sooner."

"What?"

He looked at me with haunted eyes. "Did Cain ever ask you how many toes he had?"

As usual, when Otis said it, it became obvious. Cain was one of them. I saw the future then, just for a moment. The life of our boss would not come without cost. It was up to me to determine whose life would be given in exchange.

Otis was beyond competent, he was far more dangerous than almost anyone on the planet. I was more dangerous yet, but we each had a back. Two people working together are four times as deadly as one man alone. I didn't want to bring Otis, but Cain was one of them, and Cain knew everything. "Sounds like we have a job to do," I said.

Otis took a deep breath. "Yeah. Else we're screwed."

"We're probably screwed anyway."

"Sucks to be us, I guess. I'll cover you."

"Otis. We have to do this, but don't take any chances you don't have to. The first priority is to get Cain. The second priority is to get you out safe."

He looked at me, angry. "Up yours, man. We're partners."

Meeting V

Smith rocked back, leaning on the windowsill behind him. "I have sent my final report," he said.

I took a sip of coffee to cover my silence.

"All it said was, 'Good-bye.'"

"And then you found me."

"No, I sent it while we were talking. It will be many years before they receive it." He stood. "Farewell, Mr. Nash. Thank you for the company." He laid a generous amount of money on the table. "Please let me pay for your coffee. It is the least I can do, if today we can end our war." He turned and slowly walked up the street.

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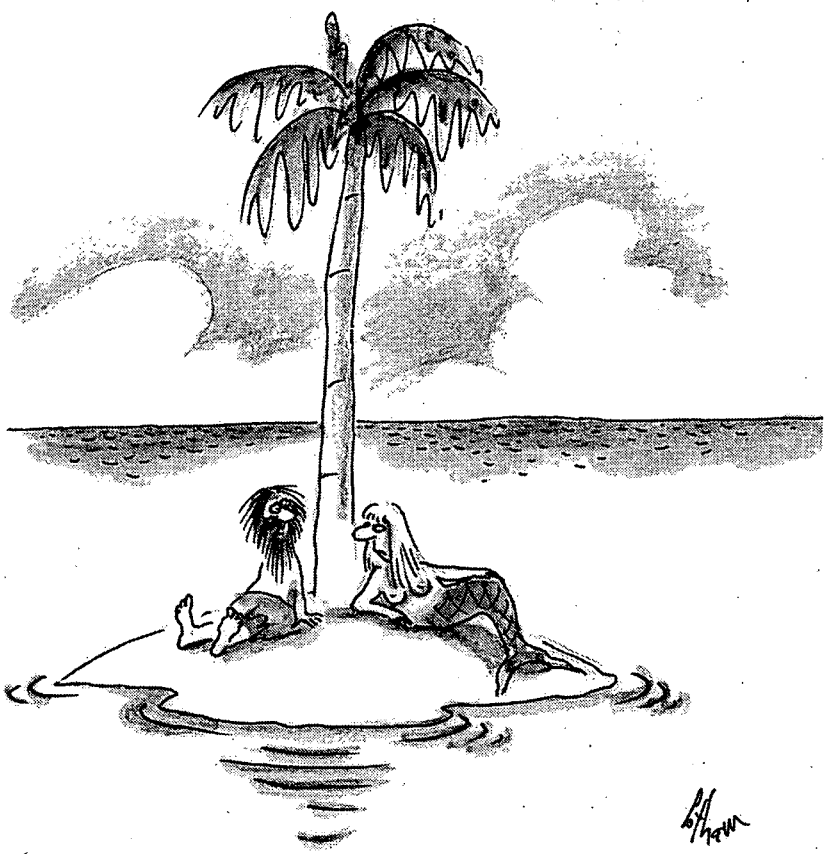
I stood also, and felt the weight in my coat pocket that had not been there before. I knew even before I touched it that it was a pistol, probably a Walther, favored by James Bond and alien invaders alike. Light, compact, and very effective at short range. I left the money where it was and walked up the street in the direction Smith had gone.



"I'm terrified that you'll leave me."

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Heather Lindsley's first fiction in print appears in the recent anthology Talking Back. *She is the author of several plays and a proud member of the Clarion West Class of 2005. She says she has spent the last sixteen years trying to follow her college advisor's recommendation that she use her powers for good, not evil. After you read this crafty story, you'll probably thank that college advisor.*

Just Do It

By Heather Lindsley

SOMETIMES THE ONLY warning is a flash of sun on the lens of a sniper's scope. Today I'm lucky enough to catch the mistake.

Funny, I think as I duck down behind the nearest parked car, I don't *feel* lucky.

The car is a tiny thing, an ultra enviro-friendly Honda Righteous painted an unambiguous green. Good for the planet, bad for cover. Ahead there's an H5 so massive and red I first take it for a fire truck. The selfish bastard parked illegally, blocking an alley, and for that I'm grateful.

I take a quick look at the roof of the building across the street before starting my dash to the Hummer. Halfway there a woman in plastic devil horns steps into my attempt to dodge her and her clipboard.

"Would-you-care-to-sign-our-petiton-in-favor-of-the-effort-against-ending-the-Florida-blockade?" Damn, she's good. She sounds like she trained with a preBay auctioneer.

I feint left and dart right, putting her between me and the Shooter and

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countering, "I-already-signed-it-thanks!" so she won't follow. It's not the first lie I've told today, and it's not likely to be the last.

Temporarily safe behind the Hummer, I lean against the heavily tinted windows of the far back seat door, glad to be standing upright but panting and sweating and wishing I wasn't wearing the black jumpsuit I reserve for funerals and job interviews. Nanofiber, my ass — it can't even keep up with a little physical activity on a hot April day.

I start the long walk toward the front bumper, figuring I'll duck into the alley and continue on my way one block over. It seems like a good plan until another Shooter steps out of the alley.

This one has a pistol. I'd go cross-eyed if I tried to look down the barrel.

"Oh, come on," I say, backing away slowly. "Not the face."

He dips the barrel down a bit. I sigh and start pulling the zipper at the high neck of my jumpsuit in the same direction. I stop just shy of revealing cleavage — I'll get shot in the face before I give this punk an eyeful.

He shrugs and fires.

"You little bastard!" I yell at his retreating back as I pull the dart out of my forehead. "I want your license number!"

Of course he doesn't bother to stop. They never do.

The itching starts almost immediately, and I reflexively reach up and touch the bump above my eyes. I know better than to scratch it, but I do anyway. The scratching releases a flood of chemicals that creates a powerful and specific food craving. I brace myself.

French fries. French fries from the den of the evil clown, where they don't even pretend to use potatoes anymore. I hate those French fries, so golden and crispy on the outside, so moist and fluffy on the inside —

No no no no no, I do not want them.

I manage to get past the first shadow the clown casts on my route with relative calm, but by the second the itching is more intense and all I can imagine are French fries. Disgusting, nasty, tasty, delicious French fries.

This is not the way to walk into a job interview.

The site of my two o'clock appointment looms in the office tower ahead...right behind a third opportunity to relieve the craving. I keep moving, trying not to think about how well the diabetes-inducing corn syrupy sweet ketchup complements the blood pressure-raising salty savor of the fries.

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I make a full circuit through the revolving doors of the office building before going back toward the object of my involuntary, chemically enhanced desire.

The food odors pounce immediately and I can almost feel the molecules sticking to my clothes. Even if I turn around now I'll smell like fast food.

"Let's get this over with," I say unnecessarily to the credit scanner, staring it down until it greenlights my ability to pay for food I don't really want. None of the automat compartments contain fries, which is unusual, so I punch hard at a picture of French fries on the order panel. The dents in the panel tell me I'm not the only customer who feels antagonistic about buying food here.

It shouldn't take more than a minute or two for the fries to appear in a compartment, so when they don't I start pounding on the automat.

"Hey, hurry it up!" I yell, scratching furiously at the bump on my forehead.

The back door of the empty fry compartment slides open. An eye stares out at me.

"What?"

"Fries. I need fries."

"We're out of fries," the voice behind the automat says.

"How can you be out of fries? You've got Shooters out there making people crave the damned things!"

"That's why we're out."

"Doesn't the head office coordinate this stuff?"

The eye blinks twice and the door slides shut.

It's 1:47, enough time to go back to the second place if I hurry. But I don't hurry. I pace in the street, muttering to myself like a lunatic. It's almost five minutes before I quit trying to control the craving and dash back the way I came.

I give the next credit scanner an especially dirty look, then yank open the one compartment with fries. I stop only to pump blobs of ketchup from the dispenser. On my way out I pass an old man scratching his arm as he raves through an open compartment, "How can you be out of fish sandwiches?!"

"Try the one on Third and Pine," I say around a mouthful of fries.

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* * *

CraveTech's offices are both plush and haphazard, the combined result of a record-breaking IPO and the latest design fad: early dot-com retro. I arrive sweaty, greasy, nauseated, and thoroughly pissed off. I smile at the receptionist anyway, a fashionably sulky blonde boy seated in a vintage Aeron chair behind a desk made out of two sawhorses topped with an old door and a crystal vase.

"Alex Monroe. I have a two o'clock with Mr. Avery."

"Two o'clock?" he says pointedly. It's 2:02. "Have a seat. Something to drink while you're waiting?"

"Water please." I'll probably retain every ounce. Damn salty French fries. There are pills that reduce bloating, of course — they sell them out of the same automat — but I wouldn't hand over any more of my money.

I've just taken my first sip when a young man pops out of the office. He looks like a typical startup manager: handsome, well-dressed, and almost certainly in over his head.

"Ms. Monroe, welcome!" He bounds up to me, hand extended. During the handshake he nods toward my forehead. "Ah, I see you use our products!" He laughs heartily at his own joke. I laugh back. I want this job.

"It's a wonderful time to be in chemical advertising, Ms. Monroe," he says, shepherding me into his office. I notice he has a proper desk. "We have some exciting deals in the works. Exciting, exciting deals."

"Really?" I say, distracted by the fry-lump in my stomach.

"Oh, yes. Now that the Supreme Court has reversed most of those class action suits, Shooters don't have to be stealthy. We've had to discontinue the tobacco lines for the time being, but otherwise it's open season on consumers."

I make another effort to join in his laughter, and, reaching toward the bump on my head, add, "It certainly is effective."

"Indeed." He smiles like he loaded the dart himself. "So," he says, picking up my resume, "I see your background is in print."

"Yes, but I've done some work in fragrance influence, and I'm very interested in chemical advertising's potential."

"Well, it is a growing field, plenty of room for trailblazers, especially with campaigns as impressive as these." He sets my resume aside. "And

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of course we still have quite a lot of synergy with print." He pulls an inch-long Crave dart out of a drawer and drops it on the desk between us. I resist the urge to cringe at the sight of the wretched thing.

"What do you see?" he asks.

I want to say *a menace*, but instead I tap the delivery barrel and give the context-appropriate answer. "Unused ad space."

Suddenly he's a schoolmaster who has finally found a bright pupil in a classroom full of dunces.

"Exactly, Ms. Monroe. *Exactly*. No square millimeter wasted, that's what I say." He leans across the table and whispers conspiratorially, "We're looking at co-branding an AOL-Time-Warner-Starbucks Lattepalooza Crave with a Forever Fitness session discount."

"Wow."

"Yes. Coupons on the darts. How does that grab you?"

"Coupons."

"Tiny coupons, like the ones on swizzle sticks. Can't you just see it? You get Stuck, so you want the product, but you're also concerned about your weight. The coupon helps. The coupon tells you the provider cares about your concerns. It tells you they understand." He leans back in his chair, my cue to speak.

"Interesting. But I'd go log-in rebate rather than immediate discount. Same message, same coverage, easier on the bottom line."

He leans forward again. "I like the way you think, Ms. Monroe."

I hate meeting at Sandra's house — her cats are constantly trying to climb up on my lap, I suspect because they know I'm allergic to them. But Sandra is my best friend from college, and also my cell leader, so I usually end up here at least once a week.

"Whoa, right in the forehead," she says when she opens the door.

"Yeah, and that's an ugly one on your neck."

"That's a hickey."

"Oh, uh, sorry. Or congratulations, I guess."

"Eh," she shrugs, heading to the kitchen.

I follow. "Um, aren't you a little old to be getting those?"

"Maybe, but Liam's not too old to be giving them." Sandra has a taste for idealistic young revolutionaries.

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She starts to make herbal tea, and I know enough not to ask for coffee instead.

We take the tea to the lumpy, cat-hair covered futon in the living room. "How'd the interview go?"

"Shaky start. Getting Stuck really threw me off. But I did manage to laugh at his jokes, and, sad to say, I'm more or less qualified."

"You do speak their language." Sandra likes to remind me that I've only recently stopped being part of the problem. "So where do things stand?" she asks.

"He said he only had one more interview, and he'd call to let me know by the end of the week."

"Did you pick up anything while you were there?"

"Not much about the next formulas. AOL-Time-Warner-Starbucks is definitely in now, but that's old news."

"But you think you can get access? The job's in the right division?"

"Close enough. Marketing's always looking over R&D's shoulder. It won't seem strange for me to be poking around."

"What should I tell our counter-formula development contact?"

"Well, assuming I get the job, and assuming I can start right away, three weeks. Maybe four. It'll depend on their security."

She seems satisfied with this answer. "What about Plan B? How's the Mata Hari routine working on our favorite evil genius?"

"He's not evil — he's just oblivious."

She raises an eyebrow at this. "Dangerously oblivious."

"Yes, I know." I concentrate on picking cat hair off my clothes. "It's going fine. Fourth date tonight. Expensive place. I should get going, actually." I rise and head for the door. She stops me and stares pointedly at my forehead.

"Alex, don't forget — he's the enemy."

I consciously abort an eye-roll and substitute a smile. "Dangerously oblivious genius equals enemy. Check." I give her a little wave as I step outside.

"Which restaurant are you going to?" Sandra asks from the doorway.

"Prima."

Her brow furrows. "Don't they serve real meat?"

"Oh yes — and I'll be ordering a steak," I say, taking a moment to enjoy her disapproving look.

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* * *

"I'll have the porterhouse. Rare, please."

"Make that two," Tom says. "Mine medium."

"Very good," the server says. "I'll be back with the first course shortly." He gives us each a prim little four-star nod as he leaves.

I put my elbows on the white linen tablecloth and rest my chin on my interlaced fingers. "I'm not sure I can ever love a man who would ruin a perfectly good steak."

Tom leans into the candlelight, too. "And I'm not sure I can trust a woman who likes her meat nearly raw."

"I guess we'll just have to stay together for the sex."

"And the children." He raises his glass to his lips.

"I'm not having sex with children, you pervert."

He chokes on his wine and grabs his napkin. I have to give him points for not looking around to make sure we haven't been overheard.

"If I'd known you'd be shooting wine out of your nose I'd have suggested a Merlot," I say as innocently as I can manage.

"How," he coughs, "did I ever end up in such hazardous company?"

WE MET accidentally at a Better Living Through Chemistry Expo sponsored by Dow-DuPont-Bristol-Myers-Squibb-PepsiCo six weeks ago.

Actually, we met at a hotel bar during the expo. I was running my report through my head, thinking about the companies that had the most bad news for humanity in the works. He sat down a couple of barstools away. We traded a little eye contact and a few shy smiles in the dim light.

"So which of these evil bastards are you representing?"

He laughed. "CraveTech."

"Ooh, a startup. Exciting."

"Yeah. What about you?"

"Me? I'm with an underground group whose goal is to liberate people from the tyranny of corporate chemical dependence."

"Huh. Underground, you said?"

"Yeah, we're not very good at that part." I was already starting to like his laugh, especially since it came so easily. "Actually, I freelance in marketing."

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"Anything I might have seen?"

"Maybe the *Junior Chemical Engineer* campaign."

"'Big Molecules for Little Hands.'"

"That's the one," I said, suddenly aware I was twisting a lock of my hair around my finger. I reached for my drink.

"Wasn't there a massive judgment against them in one of the last big class action suits?"

"No, that was Union-Pfizer's *My First Exothermic Reaction*. Ours were just repackaged *Make Your Own Cologne!* kits left over from the last Queer Eye reunion tour."

"Clever." He got up and closed the barstool gap between us.

"Despicable. So what do you do at CraveTech?"

"I run the place."

"That's funny," I said, laughing until he slid the nearest candle closer. I squinted at a face I almost recognized from the cover of *Time-Newsweek*.

"Where are your glasses?"

"Contacts tonight."

"You lose the glasses when you don't want to be recognized."

"Yeah, sort of a — "

"Reverse Clark Kent thing."

He smiled. "Yeah," and I could feel his geeky little heart reaching out for mine.

Tonight he's wearing his glasses. He looks cute in them.

"Of course, the really exciting work is in BeMod," he says, slicing into his steak.

"BeMod?" This seems like a good time to play dumb.

"Behavior Modification. The current dart formulas can make you want to ingest something — food, smoke, whatever. That's easy."

"Easy for you," I say, raising my eyebrows toward the bump that's only just beginning to subside.

At least he has the grace to look embarrassed. "Yeah, uh, sorry about that. But once we ship the darts to the providers, it's pretty much out of CraveTech's hands. I get Stuck sometimes, too, you know."

I spell the word *oblivious* in my head over and over, until I lose the urge to punch him. It takes four this time, so I miss hearing yet another

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version of the "If It Wasn't CraveTech It Would Be Someone Else" speech.

"...anyway, it's all just using the chemistry of cravings," he's saying when I'm calm enough to tune back in. "The fact that you have to buy whatever it is you're craving is an indirect consequence."

"An awfully profitable indirect consequence." I stab at a carrot.

"Yes, but see, that's the thing: the next big leap in the field is to skip straight to the buying part. We've been doing some promising work with what happens to brain chemistry when avid consumers watch successful commercials."

"So you're trying to synthesize a drug that will make people go out and buy MaxWhite toothpaste."

"Or a pair of NeoNikes. Or an H5."

"Oh my God."

He unleashes his Boy Genius grin. "Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?"

I report for my first day at CraveTech two weeks later. No one mentions that I'm dating the CEO, so I assume it hasn't gotten out. Still, I make a point of flirting back — and being overheard — when the cute young thing from Amazon-FedEx-Kinko's makes her rounds.

I'd told Tom up front that I was applying for the job. He was encouraging, but made it clear he would keep his nose out of it and leave things to Avery. I never see Tom around the marketing department — he seems more interested in making things than selling them, which I find endearing. If only he weren't making such awful things.

I flop down on Sandra's futon, narrowly missing a cat.

She puts mugs of tea on the table while I fish an envelope out of my shoulder bag. When she sits down next to me I place the envelope in her hands.

"Information," I say, "and lots of it." She takes the data card out of the envelope and peers at it as if she can actually make sense of what it contains.

"This is all of them?"

"All the formulas set to come out over the next six months. I've included a release schedule so you'll know which ones will be hitting the street first."

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"The counter-formula team is gonna love this."

"They'd better. That little card represents a month of my life spent smiling at banalities and pretending to care about other people's kids."

"So you're ready to quit." She sounds relieved.

"I'd love to, but I don't think I can just yet. I still haven't found anything about this BeMod stuff. Tom keeps going on about it, but as far as I can tell it hasn't surfaced in R&D."

"Isn't it weird that he seems so serious about BeMod but you can't find it at CraveTech?"

I laugh. "So you think he has some other lab where he's developing chemicals he can use to rule the world?"

"Maybe not rule the world...just make a shitload of money, which is close enough."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

She shifts uncomfortably on the futon. "It just seems like he's been awfully specific about this BeMod stuff, and it hasn't turned up where you'd expect it."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"I think it's time you broke up with him, and maybe quit CraveTech, too."

"But if this BeMod stuff is in development somewhere, we'll need to get our hands on it and start on a counter-formula as soon as we can."

"That's true."

"And how do we do that if I don't keep seeing him?"

The cell leader finally overcomes the college buddy. "Just be careful. Don't get too attached to him."

I pick up the data card, two gig worth of corporate espionage. "Does this seem like I'm too attached?"

I arrive at Tom's place in a foul mood. He doesn't notice. *Dangerously oblivious.*

We're still in the foyer when he starts in about BeMod.

"I read a fascinating study on endorphins today. Apparently you can stimulate — "

"Can we please talk about something other than biochemistry?" I drop my bag on the floor.

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He looks surprised and a little hurt. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize I was boring you."

"You're not boring me." I reach for his hand as we head into the living room. "I just think we have more in common than an interest in BeMods and DC Comics." I haven't gotten around to telling him I prefer Marvel.

He stops and pulls me back toward him. "I love you."

"See, there you go — I love me, too. Something else we have in common."

"Oh for God's sake," he sighs, collapsing on his down-filled couch. "I'm trying to be serious."

"I know." I sit down next to him. "I'm sorry. I just need a little more time."

"Okay. A little more time," he says, kissing my forehead and then my neck.

It's so easy to kiss him back.

The next time I go to Sandra's, she has a data card for me.

"What's this?"

"A press release. It says CraveTech is voluntarily recalling all darts because internal studies have shown them to trigger heart attacks and strokes in a small but substantial segment of the population. We need you to send it out from the CraveTech network."

I hand the card back to her. "The media will figure out it's bogus."

"Not before the stock plummets. We're set up to trigger a small drop, and the release will do the rest."

"You know I won't be able to go back there after I send it. They'll trace it to me."

"I know." I stare hard at her. She doesn't flinch.

"And I'll have to break up with Tom."

"You need to do that anyway, Alex. It's been almost six months. That's too long. It's longer than you've dated anyone for real."

"Sandra, sending this press release is just throwing a brick through a window. It's meaningless in the long run. They'll replace the window. The stock price will readjust."

"But it will slow them down."

"Sandra, if it isn't CraveTech, it'll be...."

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"What?"

"Nothing." I take the card.

"You'll send the release?"

"I'll send it."

I put the few personal items that decorated my cubicle in a gym bag. I never had a picture of Tom on my desk. That would have been indiscreet.

The press release glows on my work station, one twitch away from every major news outlet and the most incendiary of the minor ones. If I had a picture of Tom, I might have stared at it for a while, maybe even whispered *Sorry* to it.

But I don't, so I just flick Send.

I'VE COME TO BREAK UP with him. "You're early," he says when he greets me at the door. "I've planned something special." I follow him out to the deck.

"For what?"

"Our six-month anniversary." There's a cloth-covered table and dining chairs, a silver champagne bucket on a stand. "In another twenty minutes there'll be a sunset, too." He says this like he paid for it. "But, you know," he looks oddly apologetic, "you're early."

"Tom, I'm sorry...we're not going to have a six-month anniversary."

I expect anything from him but the crooked Boy Genius smile I love so much. "This isn't about the press release, is it?"

I sit, a little inelegantly in my surprise.

"What press release?"

He laughs. "This conversation will probably be less awkward if I just tell you I had all your CraveTech e-mails routed to me before they went out."

Ah.

"I was a little surprised that you actually sent it, but I do understand. I appreciate your beliefs. I love you for them — I want you to know that." He pours us each a glass of champagne. "And besides, you really helped me out with those counter-formulas."

I pick up my glass then set it down again. "Helped you out?"

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"Absolutely. My people made a couple of tweaks, though. Your group's design wasn't very cost effective at the ten thousand unit level."

"Wait, wait, wait. *You're* going to manufacture our counter-formulas?"

"Oh, yes. The marketing campaign has been in development at a subsidiary company for weeks now. And the profit projections — Alex, you wouldn't believe it. Apparently people really, really hate the craving darts." Oh, my oblivious darling. "They'll pay twice the cost of the actual food just to make the cravings go away.

"But they won't have to. We'll be giving away the counter-formula for free.

"Funny thing about that — the research shows people would rather pay a couple of bucks to get the antidote from a familiar, trusted source than from a pack of anarchists with a habit of blowing up buses."

"Blowing up buses? What're you — "

"Oh, it's a little something we're planning for the fourth quarter. Disinformation campaign. It's ready for implementation now, but we think everyone will be more inclined to actively hate you during the holidays."

"Hate me?" I stand up and start backing toward the door.

"Well, not you, your group. They'll love you, Alex. You'll be managing my charitable organizations, giving away money to worthy causes right and left. People love that. And they'll love me. People love CEOs whose wives do that kind of stuff."

"Wives?" He brings out a pistol and fires a dart into my neck. I pull out the dart and drop it on the ground.

"What was in that thing?"

He answers my question with a question as he pops open a little black velvet box.

"Alex, will you marry me?"

"Tom, you sneaky little — " I say, lost between admiration and horror. "Will I *marry* you?"

Of course I will.

Tom Jr. has a hard time waking up in the morning. He gets it from me, not his father, who is always up before the crack of dawn, especially since the BeMod wide dispersal aerosol went into production.

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"Tommy, wake up!" I call out toward his room. There's only a muffled grumbling in response.

I walk up to his doorway. "Really, Tommy, it's time to get going. You'll be late for school."

He rolls over, groaning, but doesn't make a move to get up. I unholster my parenting gun and shift the round in the chamber from *Go to Bed* to *Wake Up*.

"Get up, Tommy," I say as I draw a bead on his sleep-tousled head. "I'm not going to tell you again."

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THIS MONTH'S COVER celebrates the recent discovery of water on one of the moons of Saturn. While we probably can't rival that news item, we hope you'll feel *almost* as excited about the stories coming in the months ahead.

Fantasy fans will be pleased to know that Imago Bone and Persimmon Gaunt will return next month. In Chris Willrich's "Penultima Thule," the poet and the thief travel to the end of the world—literally—to rid themselves of the cursed book.

We've also got a new story by Carolyn Ives Gilman scheduled for August. In "Okanoggan Falls," Ms. Gilman shows us a Midwestern town suffering under the rule of alien invaders—and how one housewife tries to alter the inevitable.

Looking ahead, we'll have an interesting experiment in the September issue: three writers try their hands at finishing the story that Harlan Ellison was unable to complete. Mr. Ellison was pleased by the results; we think you'll share his sentiment.

We've also got new stories in the works by Paolo Bacigalupi, Peter S. Beagle, Charles Coleman Finlay, Geoff Ryman, and others. Those of you who, like our editor, are grieving over the recent death of John Morressy can take heart in knowing that while he might be gone, his work lives on...including several new stories we'll be publishing in the months ahead. Subscribe now to make sure you won't miss any of these out-of-this-world delights!

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CURIOSITIES

DAVY AND THE GOBLIN; OR, WHAT FOLLOWED READING "ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND," BY CHARLES EDWARD CARRYL (1884)

ON CHRISTMAS Eve, eight-year-old Davy drowses by the fireplace reading Lewis Carroll's classic novel. He is suddenly accosted by a kaleidoscopic Goblin who transforms the family's Dutch clock into a boat, transporting Davy to a weird land inhabited by storybook figures including Robinson Crusoe, Robin Hood (and his daughter Little Red Riding), Sindbad and his Roc, and Sham-Sham: the last of the Forty Thieves, who stirs a simmering cauldron filled with pocket-watches (although a watched pot never boils). Davy also encounters the Hole-Keeper (a two-dimensional sentinel who ties knots in holes) plus a whale in a waistcoat, the grotesque Cockalorum, and the notorious Butterscotchmen. After bizarre adventures, Davy is gently awakened by his grandmother and the friendly aromas of dinner.

Davy and the Goblin frankly imitates the *Alice* books, yet Carryl is nearly the equal of Carroll in his use of wordplay and corkscrewed logic. *Davy* includes several long poems of nonsense verse that are impressively Carrollian, including one nautical poem that has been widely anthologized, which begins "A capital ship for an ocean trip was the *Walloping Window-Blind.*"

Charles Edward Carryl (1841–1920) was a millionaire who held a seat on the New York Stock Exchange for thirty-four years, but found time for occasional contributions to the children's magazine *St. Nicholas*, in which *Davy* was serialized. He dedicated this fantasy novel to his son Guy Wetmore Carryl (1873 – 1904), who went on to write some superb nonsense verse of his own.

—F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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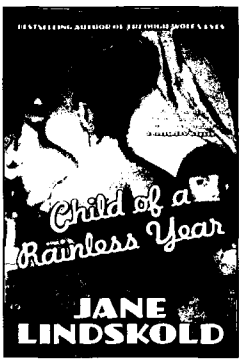

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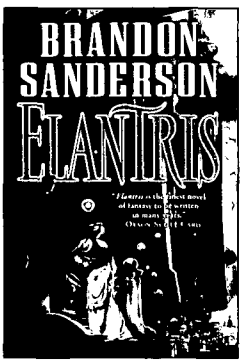

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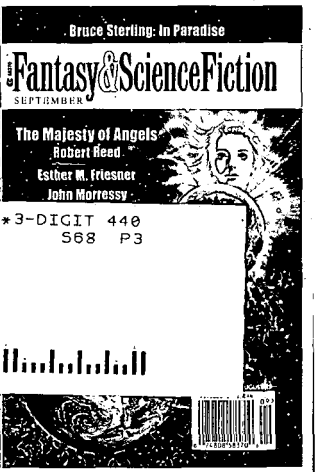

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